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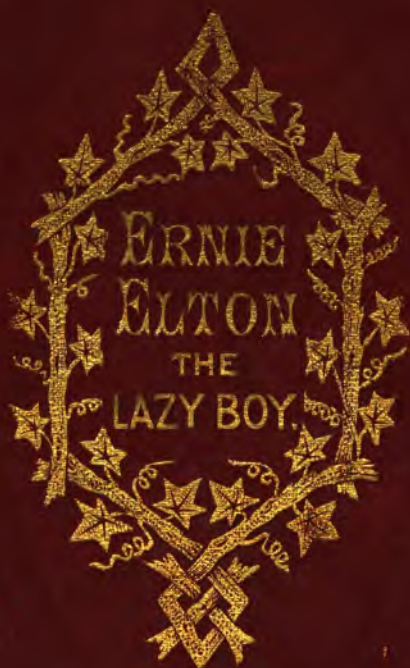
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The Young Poachers in the Dining Room.

P. 230.

Front.

ERNIE ELTON,

The Lazy Boy.

BY

ELIZABETH EILOART.

~~~~~  
MOTTO AND MORAL.

"Idle folks take most pains."  
~~~~~

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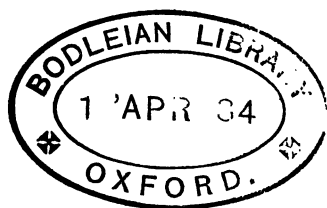
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TO
MY BOYS,

THIS BOOK,
WHICH HAS AFFORDED THEM SO MUCH AMUSEMENT
THAT I WAS INDUCED TO PUBLISH IT,
IN THE HOPE THAT OTHER YOUNG FOLKS MIGHT LAUGH
AS OFTEN OVER IT AS THEY HAVE DONE,

Is Dedicated,
BY THEIR
AFFECTIONATE MOTHER,
ELIZABETH EILOART.



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ERNIE ELTON.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.



He was lazy ! if you had only known him ! To have seen him drawing on his boots, or buttoning his coat, would have made you wonder how any boy's fingers could have been so long about so little. He would sit by the fire and let it go out, rather than take the trouble to put coals on, or even tell Mary, the maid, they were wanted. He never came down to breakfast till it was half over, though he was always the first to go to bed ; and, if it had not been that he was fonder of eating than even of ease, I don't believe, if you had offered to feed him, he would have exerted himself to open his mouth.

He was generally to be seen with his hands in his pockets, and his eyes half closed ; looking as

solid and sober as if he were thinking over the hardest lesson that ever a boy had to remember; but, if you asked him what his thoughts were about, he would open his eyes just a little wider, to stare at you, and say, "I never think—it's almost as bad as work; and what's the use of doing either, if you can get anyone else to do it for you?"

He was too lazy even to play—at least, as play should be played, with might and main, and right good-will, as I hope you all play; running, racing, laughing, shouting, exercising limbs and lungs, as it is fit you should. Once he went out snowballing, because his mother said, when his schoolfellows came to ask him, that he should not sit over the fire any longer; and Ellie, his sister, by her own especial request, went too. Well, they came to the village green, Ernie with his hands in his pockets, crawling along after the other boys and girls, who went bounding and racing along, and then he said to his sister, "Ellie, if you'll make me up a snowball, I think I'll throw it at Tom Brooke." Tom heard him, and sent such a nice little one right in Ernie's mouth, which was the coldest thing he had swallowed for many a day, and then followed up the attack in such style that Ernie ran, actually ran all the way

home into the kitchen, to seek shelter with Mary, with his coat and cap as white with snow as ever the Miller of Dee's was with flour.

Ernie Elton's home was a pretty little house at one end of a quiet village, about thirty miles from London. There was the blacksmith, and the baker, the butcher, and the general shop, a few cottages for the labouring people, and two or three better sort of houses for the more genteel part of the population in it. Amongst these stood Mr. Elton's cottage—the cosiest and prettiest of all, with a wide porch over the doorway, where Ellie and her mother would sometimes of a summer evening sit and work. A window on either side of it, one with clear white muslin curtains in it in summer, and warm red ones in winter; the other with nothing but a short muslin blind, so that people passing down the road should not see too plainly what Mary or her mistress were about. But, in my opinion, that blind was a great mistake, for, though the room it screened was the kitchen, I always thought it the pleasantest and prettiest in the house; the tin covers over the mantelpiece were so bright, and the dresser kept so clean, with a great jug of flowers always on it; and the red tiles on the floor were so much pleasanter to look at than boards would have been, and the great

snow white table was such a good contrast to the six dark brown carved old-fashioned chairs; and the china closet, which was a three-cornered cupboard, with glass doors placed at right angles with the side and back of the room, full of curious old-fashioned cups and plates, was of itself a picture; so that altogether, if passers-by had seen Mary peeling potatoes, or her mistress making a pie, I don't think there would have been much harm done.

Over the kitchen and parlour were bed rooms, with lattice windows peeping through ivy, which grew very thick, and spread over the old red tiled gabled roof, stretching its thick gnarled twisted branches far and wide, and in summer it was a sight to see the red and white roses that grew on either side the porch, and reached up even to Ellie's little window, so that she could put out her hand and gather them, as she often did, for this little maiden loved flowers and birds, and fields, and butterflies dearly, as all good children should love such sweet and precious gifts of their Great Father. In front of the house was the brightest and prettiest flower garden you ever saw, very tiny, but oh! so full of the sweetest and fairest of roses and lilies, bright nasturtiums, bold sweet Williams, and golden escholzia, that when

the morning sun shone on them, looked back at him and laughed. And at the back, spread a famous kitchen garden, that produced in summer such peas, and currants, and raspberries, and great red gooseberries, weighing down the branches on which they hung: and there were apple trees, old as the house, that bore in autumn fruit only, rivalled by that on the great pear tree, which spread against its side wall. Under the pear tree was a small border of flowers, such as bees love, and fine double hollyhocks, and tall sunflowers over the bee-hives; and at the end of the garden was a small paddock for the cow, and Mr. Elton's pony, when that hard-working animal was at home to graze in it.

Ernie's father was not rich. He cultivated a little land for himself, and collected the rents of a wealthy gentleman, who lived two miles off. He had held a good appointment in London, but his health had obliged him to give it up, and take to a country life. And, as in the sweet pure air he grew stronger and healthier, neither his wife nor himself ever regretted the large income they had lost, or the handsome house they had been obliged to part with.

But little Ellie, who was only nine years old when, three years before this, they all left Lon-


don, was best pleased at the change; for she knew nothing of the cares and anxieties that had at first troubled her father and mother, and she *did* know that it was a much pleasanter thing to be a little girl in the country than in London—very much nicer to roam about in the green lanes than to take a prim walk with the nurse through the long, stiff London streets; far better fun to go blackberrying, or maying, or nutting, than to play at school with her little friends in the square; and nothing could equal the delight of a day in the woods with her dear mother in the glorious summer time. Little Ellie was not a bit like her brother, for she had a firm belief that, so far from work being a terrible thing to be avoided and shunned, it was in itself pleasant and good, and pleasanter and better still in the results it produced. She helped her mother with the needlework, and Mary in the lighter labours of the house; she gathered peas and fruit from the garden, and pulled up the weeds as soon as they showed their heads there; took care, whenever required, of her little brothers Freddy and Georgy, and learned the lessons and did the exercises her mother set her—so that you see, unlike Ernie, she really had no time to be fretful, peevish, or unhappy.

But, grave little woman as she was when about her work, she could play—no one better—when the time for play came round—romp and run, climb stiles, and make hay as well as any healthy country girl of her age need to do.

As to Mrs. Elton, you may be sure that, with Ellie to teach, and two little boys to take care of, and the house to manage, and a great deal of needlework to do, and only one maid and her dear little daughter to help her, Mrs. Elton had enough on her hands. In all the house, there was only Ernie who was always lazy and a trouble to himself and everyone about him.

CHAPTER II.

ABOUT TOM BROOKE'S GRANDMOTHER, AND HOW ERNIE
LIKED SWINGING BETTER THAN DINING.

 HE best boy in the village for cricket, swimming, bat-and-ball, running, leaping, and, I think—to tell the whole truth—fighting, was Tom Brooke, one of Ernie's school-fellows. He lived at least three miles off, but, in right of attending Dr. Dale's school regularly, and dining every day with his grandmother, who lived very near Mr. Elton in the prettiest little cottage I ever saw, and spending nearly all his play-hours on the village green, Tom was always considered one of the village boys.

Very glad most of the other boys were of this, for, although, as I hinted, Tom could fight—and *did* fight now and then—still, as he was never known to commence an unjust quarrel, or attack a smaller boy, and was a first-rate leader in all boyish sports and pastimes, there was not a lad

in the place who was not ready and proud to call him "our Old Tom."

Well, it was Tom's birthday, and Tom was just fourteen, but as tall and as strong, and—except at his books—as clever as most boys two years older; and his grandmother (who loved Tom, I think, almost better than even his mother did) had arranged that, as it was the summer holidays, Tom and some ten or twelve of his school-fellows should spend the day with her.

Now anyone that knew dear old Mrs. Leigh would feel that this was the most charming way of spending a birthday that could possibly be suggested to a schoolboy. In the first place, as I said, it was summer, and the old lady had had the grass in her little paddock cut rather earlier than she otherwise would have done, on purpose that the boys might have the fun of making hay. Then there was her garden, with a great many more flowers in it than Mr. Elton's—for of course Mrs. Leigh did not want nearly so many vegetables for herself and her two maids as were required for Mr. Elton's family—and fruit trees—such red cherries, which were never considered ripe till Master Tom's birthday came round—and strawberries—large British Queens, every one three mouthful at least—and currants—oh, I

shall never eat again such large delicious white ones as grew trained against Mrs. Leigh's south wall! And at the end of the garden—you could not see it from the house, for two or three large pear and plum trees intervened—the old lady had had a swing placed. Not one of those without any back or sides so that you have to tire out your arms with holding the ropes; but a strong safe one, with moveable bars which you slipped over your shoulders, and were then so fenced in that nothing could happen to you unless the ropes gave way; and Mrs. Leigh took good care that they should always be of the best and strongest.

It certainly seemed strange that Ernie should be one of the boys invited by Tom on this occasion. You would have thought that *he* would not add very much to the general amusement, but Tom appeared always rather to like Ernie's company, though he was very apt to play off some prank or other upon him if his laziness went beyond the point he considered permissible; and though Ernie grumbled as much at Tom (or rather more) as he did at every one else, he always kept pretty near him; for Tom very often stood his friend and protector against the other boys, with whom, generally speaking, Ernie was certainly not a favourite. In fact,

the friendship, if I may term it so, between the two, took its rise principally from this source. When Ernie first came to the village he had to endure no small share of ridicule and teasing from the boys who lived there. They played him all sorts of tricks, in school and out of it; pulled his hair when the master wasn't looking; hid his books; called him Miss Molly and Mademoiselle Ernestine; asked him if he wasn't his own sister dressed up in boy's clothes; stuck pins in the calves of his legs to teach him how to dance; set dogs at him to make him run faster; and, in fact, led him as pleasant a life as boys generally contrive one of their number shall lead whom they don't particularly approve of. At first Tom never interfered one way or the other in these little amusements; but one day they went further than he thought permissible, and he called them to order. Stephen Dobson, a heavy ill-disposed lad, two years older than Tom, between whom and himself there was a little tacit rivalry as to which should be the head of the school, and who had taken an especial delight in tormenting Ernie, resented this, and renewed his attacks upon the latter more spitefully than ever. A slight, small lad like Ernie, would, even if he had had as much pluck as Tom, have been unable to cope with his

persecutor, and as it was, all he did was to cry like a girl, and encouraged by Tom's good-natured face run up to him for protection. Now, if the truth must be told, Tom, though a thorough good fellow, was not altogether sorry for an excuse to have a good bout with Stephen, and the present seemed a very fair opportunity for deciding who should be master, so telling Ernie not to be afraid, he'd soon put a stop to this nonsense, he wasn't going to stand by and see a fellow plagued out of his life, he stripped off his jacket and challenged Dobson. The other was by no means so ready for the encounter as Tom; but it was not very easy to get out of it now. The rest of the boys formed a ring, and the combat took place. Tom became victor, but displayed a black eye, and a bruised cheek for some time after, and Stephen had still plainer tokens of the fight to show. But it was productive of very good results for Ernie. After this, Tom's supremacy in the school was established, and he took Ernie under his especial protection. He had fought for him, and had the best in the encounter, which was quite enough in Tom's opinion to entitle the other to his good offices. Ernie was very ready to avail himself of Tom's championship. He appealed to him in every scrape, and always looked to him to extir-

cate him from any difficulty his own laziness or greediness brought him into ; and, as this book will show, Ernie's scrapes were not a few.

After a while, too, Tom became acquainted with Ernie's mother and sister, and of the latter he formed an opinion which I don't think he has changed yet, that she was the prettiest, nicest, dearest little soul he ever knew. But he never told any one, not even Ellie, for a long, long time what he thought of her ; but I think Ellie, though she is Ellie Elton no longer, knows it very well now. He would have liked to ask her on his birthday, but he could not do so very well to a boy's party, so he had to content himself with her brother.

Well, this fine June day Ernie sauntered down, half an hour at least after the other boys, to Mrs. Leigh's, and on arriving there found the old lady assisting Susan, her maid, in arranging the largest parlour for dinner.

Now, if it was possible that there could be any one in this world kinder than Susan's mistress, it was Susan. She had lived with her forty years, nursed Tom's mother and Master Tom himself, and now aided and abetted Mrs. Leigh at every possible opportunity in spoiling that young gentleman and every other boy or girl they came near ; so, when these two dear old souls saw Ernie

sauntering in with his hands in his pockets, looking rather pale—for he never took sufficient exercise to get a good colour—and very neat and nice—for his mother had taken care of that—with his fair hair nicely brushed, and his little blue bow and white collar—they both said to themselves that *that* dear child was delicate, and wanted looking after.

So Mrs. Leigh offered him a glass of her nice currant wine; but Susan suggested that curds and whey would be more cooling on such a warm day, and Ernie, thinking each offer too good to be declined, said "Thank you, I think I'll take both." So Susan gave him her glass first, which, as he remarked, would cool him, and then he took the wine to prevent, as he said, being cooled too much. Then Mrs. Leigh thought, if he could eat it (as it was some time yet to dinner), a piece of plum cake would be acceptable. Susan recommended sponge, as being lighter, so Ernie, to show his politeness, again accepted both offers, and walked slowly to the hayfield, nibbling first at one piece of cake and then at the other.

Oh, what a haycock those boys had made! really almost as big as a stack; and there was Tom's rosy, sunburnt face peeping out at the top. He was pelting and being pelted; some were roll-

ing in the loose hay that lay about the field, and others trying to get up a haycock (on a smaller scale) for themselves, Tom claiming the one in which he was half buried as his own; but when they saw Ernie there was a general shout of welcome, and such a warm greeting that he was quite overpowered by it, especially as every boy contributed an armful of hay to add to his reception. He actually dropped his cake, and when he succeeded in extricating himself from the cart-load of hay they had greeted him with, and stood upright, drawling out, "Now, if it isn't too bad to serve a fellow so," he saw two of the smallest boys, Willy and Bobby, who had secured his precious morsels as they fell from his hands, and were quietly munching them.

"Oh, you two good-for-nothings, give me my cake, now—I won't stand that, I won't. I say, Tom, it's a shame to serve me so; make those two give me my cake before it's all gone. Do run and catch them, some one—I'll give half to any boy that does; I don't like running myself—it makes me so dreadfully warm."

"Here, some one, catch those two fellows," said Tom; and Willy and Bobby were chased and caught, and brought captive to Tom, who gravely inquired if they found the cake good, and,

receiving a very satisfactory answer, told them they had better finish it, for he was sure Ernie ought to be very much obliged to them for saving him the trouble of doing so.

You should have heard the howl—I can't really call it by any other name—that Ernie set up. It was his favourite cry, "Ow—ow—ow"—a long, dismal sound he always poured forth whenever he was vexed; you might hear him over half the village. And then, declaring he would have nothing to do with any of them, he turned in the direction of the swing, got in, and spent half an hour very pleasantly there.

By this time Tom suggested to his friends that they should look for a quieter amusement than haymaking, and that the swing, which they could occupy in turns, would be an agreeable change; and leading the way to it as he spoke, the boys readily followed.

"Oh, here you are, all of you, again," said Ernie, as he saw them; "you never can let a fellow be in peace long together; you're always following me wherever I go; I never can have a quiet moment to myself. Well, as you are here, give me a good swing, just to make up for stealing my cake. Give me a good push, Tom."

"All right," said Tom, and pushed Ernie with

both his closed hands in the small of his back in a manner that brought out one of his finest and longest howls.

"Ow—ow—ow, Tom, do you mean to kill me? You'll break my back—ow—ow—"

"Well, leave off making such a horrid noise, and turn out; we want the swing now."

"Well, give me a good swing; I've had it all to do myself, and it's really tiring. Push me off properly."

"You'll get out presently if I do?"

"All right," said Ernie, and high up in the air he went, and for full five minutes Tom very good-naturedly continued swinging him—then he desired him to get out.

"Oh, do go on longer; I haven't had half enough."

"But I have—come, turn out, and make room for others."

"No, I don't want to; I'm very comfortable as I am."

"But it isn't fair for you to stop there all day."

"When I've got a comfortable place, I like to stay in it. This swing suits me very nicely—there's such a good view of the garden, and those trees by the side shade the sun off so well. One would think your grandmother had had it placed

here on purpose for me. Perhaps she did. Now, don't make a disturbance, Tom, for I'm very well off here, and here I mean to stay."

"Very well," said Tom; "so you shall."

He turned and whispered to two of the boys, who, following his directions, went to the little shed where the gardener's tools were kept, and returned bearing with them the steps he used to reach the higher branches of the vine. Tom mounted on these behind Ernie, and then, as the swing was pushed towards him, seized the rope that hung from the seat, and secured it to one of the stoutest branches of the pear-tree in such a manner that Ernie remained fixed in the swing, which was now stationary, at a considerable distance from the ground; and, to make matters worse, George Blake, one of the tallest of the boys, tied his feet together with a strong piece of cord, so that he now saw the prospect before him of remaining in the swing for a much longer time than he had originally intended.

"Oh! let me out—oh! let me out!—oh! oh! Tom, do let me out."

"Now, don't hurry yourself; don't disturb yourself, Ernie; you know you like the swing so much; we mean to let you stay there all the afternoon."

"Ow—ow—ow! Tom! don't you mean to give me any dinner?"

"Dinner such a warm day as this! No, my dear boy, don't distress yourself about your dinner. We'll oblige you in that respect, just as Bobby and Willy did about the cake, by eating it for you."

"Ow—ow—what a shame! Oh, Tom, do let me out."

"No; you wouldn't get out, though you had promised, when we asked you, and now you shall stop. Perhaps you'll keep your word next time you give it."

How the boys applauded Tom then! "Served him right," was the way they summed it up, and then they started off to the strawberry beds, Tom begging them, as they went, to be careful how they trod; for he would have been sorry his grandmother's garden should be injured by his playfellows; and so they were cautious, as they gathered the rich, juicy fruit, not to tread on the beds or do any other damage. One or two of the more mischievous ones ran and showed Ernie the delicious strawberries, and asked him how he could like swinging better than gathering such nice things.

Oh, if you had but heard Ernie then! But

that was nothing to the outcry he set up when they told him they were going in to dinner; and Tom said, gravely,

“Good bye, Ernie; there’s no accounting for tastes, but yours does seem singular to me; however, as you *do* like the swing so very much better than a nice dinner, we’ll leave you to enjoy it in peace.”

And then they all ran off, leaving Ernie to wish he had never got into that unlucky swing.

“There’s one place vacant,” said Grandmamma Leigh; “my dear, are all your little friends here?”

“Oh, is there!” said Tom; “oh, I see; it’s Ernie Elton that’s missing; never mind him, grandma, he’s such a lazy fellow—let’s go on without him.”

“Oh, my dear, I couldn’t think of such a thing! Mary,”—the old lady turned to her little maid who helped Susan in the harder portion of the house work—“go and call Master Elton in.”

“Oh, no, grandma, I’ll go,” said Tom; “Mary’s got plenty to do in waiting here. I’ll tell him to come in.”

So Tom did; for he went close to the swing, and said—

"Now, Ernie, what a strange sort of a fellow you are. How can you like sitting in that swing better than eating such a famous dinner as my grandmother has provided. There's the most delicious loin of pork, so nicely roasted and stuffed with sage and onions, and the crackling so beautifully brown ! and two such fine fat fowls—my grandmother's own—almost as big as turkeys, and a beautiful little leg of pickled pork to eat with it. I thought you were fond of pork, Ernie ! and two large dishes of peas ; I came this morning early and gathered them, and they are so young and tender—don't you like peas, Ernie?"

And then, without waiting for an answer, that cruel Tom went in.

"Well, grandma, I've told him' all about the dinner, and what a very strange boy he is not to come to it ; but whether he does or not, I know I want mine, so please to send me a piece of roast pork."

"Well, he certainly must be a very extraordinary child !" said Grandmamma Leigh, as she carved the pork, "but I suppose he'll be in presently. What was he doing, dear, when you sent out to him?"

"Oh ! sitting quite still in the swing, grandma. He seems very fond of that swing ; he said before

dinner he thought you'd had it put up on purpose for him."

"Dear child ! now did he ? Well, I'm glad he likes it ; but I wish he'd come in to dinner."

"It's very doubtful, grandma ; he's such a lazy boy. I don't expect myself he'll stir out of it till about tea time."

"Dear me ! I hope he will. But if he don't come in, Susan, keep him a nice little bit of fowl and pork as warm as you can. But perhaps he cares more for puddings than meat. He may come in when he thinks they're served."

"If he don't, grandma, I'll go and call him again," said Tom.

"Do, dear ! What a strange little creature, to be sure : no wonder he looks so delicate when he don't care for his food. Poor child !"

"Now, you boys !" said Tom, looking very stern at his friends, who were all ready to burst with laughter at the idea of Ernie not caring for his food. "I should like to know what there is to laugh at ; I'll give any boy a good thrashing as soon as I conveniently can after dinner, who's so rude as to laugh while he's at table."

"Oh ! Tom, my dear, don't speak like that to your young friends," said Mrs. Leigh.

"Grandma, boys want keeping in order, and,

of course, as I'm the eldest present, I'm the proper person to do it. I'll take a piece of fowl now, if you please, Mary."

All the boys looked very grave now, and went on eating their dinner. Soon after, the second course came in, and Tom went out, as he said, "to tell that lazy fellow it was pudding time."

"Now, Ernie, why don't you come in? There's such a delicious cherry pudding, a great raspberry and currant pie, and lots of custards and tarts!"

Tom went back again, leaving Ernie in the midst of one of his longest lamentations, and returned to his dinner. "It's no use, grandma, he won't be in till we've all finished, and everything's cleared away; and then he'll come creeping in with his hands in his pockets, just as he does every morning when school's half over."

"Oh, dear! I'm sure the poor child can't be well. Save him plenty, Susan. What does he like best, Tom, my dear?"

"Well, grandma, I think if Susan puts away a chop of the roast pork, two or three slices of the boiled, all the fowl that's left, some cherry pudding and a plateful of pie, two or three custards, and as many tarts, he'll about do. He's not a bad appetite, hasn't Ernie, when once he begins."

"Well, I shouldn't have thought it from the poor child's looks," said Mrs. Leigh.

"You'll see presently,"—and Tom, who was in rather a hurry now to release Ernie, thinking his punishment had lasted long enough, soon finished his pudding, and followed by his companions, proceeded towards the swing.

"Here we are, Ernie! and we have had such a dinner," cried George Blake, when they arrived there.

"Oh! such roast pork," added Charley Wihl

"Such prime pudding," said Willy Ray.

"And *such* a currant pie," said Bobby Crane.

"Everything was first rate," chimed in two or three more.

"Oh! weren't the custards jolly?" said some others.

"Ow-ow-ow," cried Ernie, "and have you been and eaten it all, and left nothing for me?"

"Don't you think you'd deserve it if we had?" said Tom. "What have you got to say for yourself, stopping away from the table till every one's done and everything cleared away? Is that your politeness to a lady, when she asks you to dinner? I'm quite ashamed of you, Ernie. Get out of that directly, sir, and beg my grandmother's pardon."

"Oh, oh, oh, I couldn't help it, Tom! Now you know I couldn't."

"Don't talk like that, sir. Come, turn out!—are you going to keep us out of the swing all the afternoon as well as the morning?"

Tom had turned towards the swing while speaking, and George Blake had untied the cord round Ernie's legs. "Now, sir, you will come with me to my grandma, who, with her usual kindness, has saved you an excellent dinner."

"Oh, oh, what has she got for me?" said Ernie, brightening up.

"Don't interrupt me, sir! You come with me to my grandmother, and say you are very sorry for your rudeness. If you don't, if you make any trumpery excuses about the height of the swing or any such nonsense, I'm afraid you'll come to grief—so mind!"

Tom looked terribly threatening as he spoke, so Ernie thought it safest to follow him very meekly into the room they had dined in, and then tell Mrs. Leigh he was very sorry (which was perfectly true) that he had not come in before.

"Well, never mind, my dear little boy, you won't do so another time." "Not if I can help it," thought Ernie. "And here comes Susan with a nice little dinner for you, and my dear

Tom has taken care that you should have what you like best, and there are some more little niceties to come afterwards : so begin at once, and I hope you'll enjoy it."

"Don't be afraid, grandma," said Tom. "Now, young one, when you've done, come with us and have strawberries and cream in the summer-house."

Ernie really managed to get done in time to gather half-a-dozen strawberries, and to eat more than I should like to count ; but he positively refused to make hay, urging that he never could see the fun of doing such hard work, and calling it play—so the others left him to himself, Tom saying he was sadly afraid that, after all the pains he took with that boy, he should never make a man of him.

CHAPTER III.

ERNIE'S ADVENTURES WITH THE WAGONER AND THE
TINKER, AND HOW RIDING TURNED OUT HARDER
WORK THAN WALKING.



WEEK after Tom Brooke's birthday, that young gentleman came to Crane-field village again, to inform several of his more intimate friends—and somehow Ernie was always included in the number—that his father had given him permission to invite them to help make hay the following day. "We are to have dinner in the field," he said to that industrious individual, as he stood looking over his father's gate, with his hands in his pockets. "Grandma is going over early to help mother, and she's promised to make the cakes herself for tea, and take them over with her, so I hope you'll not disappoint us, Ernie, but come and do the best day's work of all, for there never was such a fellow for work as you are when once you begin."

"It's very warm weather," said Ernie. "Did you say your grandmother would make the cakes herself?"

"She's making them now, and Susan's helping her; won't they be good, that's all."

"Is there a swing about the place?" said Ernie, "because, if there is, I think I'd rather not——"

"Get into it—of course you would not on such a busy day—besides, I should think you'd had enough of that sort of thing the other day. Now good bye, old boy, and mind you're there in good time."

"I mean to be—for dinner," said Ernie, as he sauntered into the house, and asked his mother's permission to go to Mr. Brooke's the next day, which he received at once.

The next morning, soon after eight, George Blake, Charley Wild, and five or six more, called for Ernie, who, having been called at six by his father, and then at seven by his mother, had managed to crawl down a quarter of an hour before his schoolfellows arrived, and was now half way through his bread and milk. "Come," said his mother, "I can't have your friends losing their time through your dawdling. You shall go with them directly, sir, and, as a punishment for not getting up before, take this slice of dry bread

for the rest of your breakfast, and leave your bread and milk for Freddy and Georgy, to finish at luncheon."

Ernie knew it would be of no use to oppose what his mother said, so he very gloomily took his piece of bread, put on his cap, and joined the other boys, who were full of the fun they expected from the haymaking. Some had little rakes of their own on their shoulders, and others talked grandly about being able to work much better with the proper sized ones Mr. Brooke would provide. I am afraid I must own that they teased Ernie, asking him how much he thought his day's work would be worth, and whether he didn't feel rather sorry that there was no swing in Mr. Brooke's garden.

But Ernie, who was munching his bread, walked steadily on—though rather more slowly than the others liked—and scarcely opened his mouth for any other purpose for nearly twenty minutes, when he came to a stile by the roadway, where a small step offered a tolerable resting place to any tired passer-by, while a great elm tree by the side gave a pleasant shade from the morning sun, and there he sat down, and when his companions enquired what he meant by doing so, said, "What's the use of hurrying along at the

dreadful rate you've been doing ever since we started. Why, we've walked above half a mile already, and I feel quite tired. This isn't a bad seat for me, and you fellows can rest on the grass for a quarter of an hour or so, and then we can go on again a little way further."

"Oh, nonsense, when shall we get to Ashleigh Grange, at that rate," said George Blake.

"We shall be there in time for dinner," replied Ernie, "and what's the use of being sooner. As to making hay, who'd be such a goose as to do that, or any other hard work this hot weather, that can help it, I should like to know. I don't mind walking round the fields in the afternoon, and looking at the men, and then if some of you fellows will just make up a good sized haycock or two in the shade, we'd better all take a nap till tea-time, and then walk gently home in the cool of the evening. But perhaps old Mrs. Leigh will drive me back in her chaise—she seems rather fond of me, that old lady."

Well, Ernie's idea of going out for a day's hay-making, certainly wasn't the same as that of his friends, so after trying once more to get him to move, they left him at the stile, and went briskly forward.

"The selfish creatures!" said Ernie, "just like

them—and what a dreadful rate they're going at. It makes me quite hot to look at them. Well, I sha'n't hurry—make hay indeed!—why, it would take away all my appetite for dinner if I did."

Ernie sat a few minutes longer, and then a large wagon with a great many sacks in it passed. The wagoner, who was a good-natured looking young countryman, stopped as he came near Ernie, and said, "Tired, young measter?"

"Oh, very," said Ernie, shaking his head seriously; "I've walked a long way, and have to go a great deal further; would you mind giving me a lift?"

"Noa, I doan't moind; ye woan't add much to the weight. Here step up! put your foot here! There, that's it! Now ye can lay down among the sacks, and take forty winks, if ye wull."

Ernie took the wagoner's advice and a nap at the same time, but unluckily slept rather longer than was desirable, for he never woke till the stopping of the horses by a little roadside inn where the wagoner gave them water roused him, and rubbing his eyes, he said, "I declare I've been asleep. Why, where are we now? I don't know the place!"

"This is Buckstead," said the wagoner; "have ye much further to go?"

"No. Oh dear, oh dear; you've taken me more than two miles past the place I wanted to get out at. Why, I was going to dinner at Ashleigh Grange, near Beechwood."

"Well, if 'ee didn't tell me, how should I know? 'Ee had better get out, and walk back as fast as 'ee can."

"Walk back! two miles?—and it's so burning hot now. I think it's a great shame for you to have brought me so far out of my way, and the least you can do is to turn your horses' heads the other way, and take me back to Beechwood."

"That's hardly loikely," said the wagoner, "seeing 'ee never told me where 'ee wanted to get out at, and my measter expecting o' me in Lunnun to-night. Oi've no toime to spare a taking young chaps about the country!"

"Well, it's a great shame; you've used me very ill," said Ernie, as he slowly got out. "It's a very great shame, and you're a very rude fellow!" And, without giving the good-natured wagoner a single civil word for his kindness, the rude boy walked off.

It was so warm now—very much more so than when he had started, for the great rumbling wagon had been more than an hour arriving at Buckstead—that he soon began to feel really tired, and pre-

sently, when he saw a travelling tinker mounted on one donkey and leading another, he went and said to him, "You might as well let me ride on one of your donkeys; this weather's much too warm for walking."

"How far do you want to go?" said the tinker.

"To Ashleigh Grange, down by Beechwood. Don't you know Mr. Brooke's?"

"Oh, yes; I mend his pots and pans when I pass that way. Well, what will you give me for the accommodation?"

"Why," said Ernie, fumbling in his pockets, "I haven't much; but if three-ha'pence 'll do?"

"Three-ha'pence!" said the tinker, looking very disdainful, "why, it isn't a penny a mile. You don't expect me to lend you one of these prime beasts for that?"

"Well, that one's got nothing else to carry, so he might as well carry me," said Ernie.

"Tiring him out with the weight of a great heavy boy like you, and making him look to me for two penn'orth of oats at least to get up his strength again with, and all for three-ha'pence! No; that bargain 'll never do, my lad! Can't give you a ride on those terms at all!"

"You're an ill-natured fellow!" said Ernie, sulkily; "I'm sure I think this morning there's

nothing but disagreeable people to be met with."

The donkeys jogged on, and Ernie, hoping that perhaps the tinker would relent, plodded on after them, keeping as near as he could, and presently the saddle of the one on which its master rode became a little out of order, and the tinker jumped off to set it to rights.

"Now's my time," said Ernie, "I'll have a ride now in spite of that stingy old curmudgeon!" and he jumped on the back of the donkey that he had asked to be allowed to ride on, and, having a little switch in his hand, urged the beast on. "I sha'n't have to walk all the way now," said he to himself, "and I won't give that fellow anything now for using his donkey!"

"Fair and softly," said the tinker, as he mounted and followed Ernie, "we'll settle accounts presently, young man!"

You would have thought they were riding a race if you had seen them, for the tinker urged not only his own donkey, but Ernie's, to the top of their speed. Away they went, very much faster than Ernie liked, especially as the passers by called out when they saw them, "A race! a race! two tinkers running a race!" He was bumped and jolted terribly, and tried to stop; but the tinker had

determined that he should not do that till *he* chose ; and the donkey, hearing his master's voice, and feeling his master's stick, which fell not only upon his back but Ernie's, (but that *might* have been an accident, you know) dashed away in splendid style.

"Oh dear! oh dear!" said Ernie, "I wish I had never got on this horrible beast! Oh, that dreadful tinker! what does he mean by making me gallop at this rate?"

They soon came up to Ashleigh Grange, however, and, greatly to Ernie's joy, he saw the white shirts of the haymakers over the hedge of the field in which they were working. "Tom Brooke! Tom Brooke!" he called out as loud as he could, "do come and stop this dreadful donkey for me!"

Tom, hearing his name, came to the side of the field, and, when he saw what was going on, cried out "Hurrah! here's Ernie riding a race with a tinker!" Then the other boys and the haymakers all came up, and there were many more hurrahs, and "Go it, Ernie! you'll beat the tinker yet!" But the tinker knew what he was about very well, for they were coming to the open gate, and he turned the donkeys into it; and in the field, as the tinker, unluckily for Ernie, remembered very well—for he had often, when the hay was cut, taken his

donkeys there to water, or left them to graze by the side, while he mended Mrs. Brooke's saucepans—was a large pond, not very deep, but rather more so than under present circumstances was desirable for Ernie. He gave the donkey upon which that unhappy boy was riding another switch with his stick, and into the pond the tiresome creature went, with his miserable rider on his back.

Oh! if you had but seen the boys then—and, above all, if you had heard them!—how they did laugh, and shout, and dance, and clap hands—you would never have forgotten it. "Ow-ow-ow," began Ernie, "it's too bad, it really is. Oh, please, somebody come and take me out! that dreadful horrid man has made his nasty donkey run away with me!"

The tinker had now alighted from his donkey, and looking round at the boys and the haymakers, who, with Mr. Brooke at their head, were now standing by the pond, he said, "That 'ere young man has been and run away with my property!—mounted on my hanimal as I was fastening the saddle of his companion here, and rode off with it, and kept a-head of me all the way from nigh Buckstead up to here; and I want to know if it's to be allowed to take a poor four-footed dumb thing, that can't help itself, nor take its own part,

into a cold pond, after getting it into such a heat as he's been and done, and refusing to give the hanimal up to me, its rightful master, as belongs to it. There he sets, you see, as cool as a cow-cumber, and won't give me up my own donkey, that I've had, as I may say, since it was a baby in long clothes!"

"Oh, if the donkey will only give *me* up, I'm sure I'll give up the donkey!" cried Ernie.

"I'm afraid," said Tom Brooke, looking very grave, "that this is a more serious matter than you think for Ernie. Why, it's next door to horse-stealing, only, perhaps, being but a donkey they'll give you six years' transportation instead of seven."

When Ernie heard this he set up a louder howl than ever—so loud that grandmamma Leigh came from the next field, where she had been helping spread the cloth for the early dinner, to see what was the matter. When she came to the pond and saw Ernie, she lifted up her hands and eyes, saying, "Why, that poor dear odd little boy is in trouble again! How ever did he get there? I'm sure it'll give him a very bad cold."

"Oh, please Mrs. Leigh, will you lead my donkey out, for I can't get him to stir now he's got me in this pond, and my feet are quite wet,

and so are my trousers," said Ernie very pitifully.

Old Mrs. Leigh was kindness itself; but to walk, in her nice black silk dress, and clear starched muslin apron, into the middle of a dirty pond, and lead a donkey out with a great boy on his back, was even more than she could do. But she did the next best thing, and scolded her son, Mr. Brooke, who seemed able to do nothing but laugh at the whole affair, and told him what a very serious thing it would be if the poor child caught a dreadful cold and died, so that he told the tinker to call his beast out, and to go up to the house himself and get a draught of ale and some bread and cheese.

"You nasty thing, get away, do," said Ernie to the donkey, as soon as he was off its back.

"Don't you be in such a hurry to ride another man's beast again," said the tinker; "no good ever comes to young folks through making free with other people's property. Howsomever I'll let you off the three ha'pence you promised me, so you can't say but what you've had a cheap ride."

Grandmamma Leigh now took Ernie up to the house, and made him change his wet shoes and stockings for some of Tom's, and he had, too, to

put on some of the other's trousers, which, being much too long, were rolled up round his ankles. "And now," said the dear old lady, "you'll do very nicely, and if you like you shall help Martha and me spread the dinner in the hayfield; for the maids and all are haymaking to day; but I'm sure you don't look strong enough for that, so you shall be my little footman, and that won't be such very hard work you know."

No, that would suit Ernie very nicely, so he did all the little jobs grandma Leigh set him—and they were very little easy ones indeed—so well that she was quite pleased with him, and wondered however dear Tom could have called the poor child lazy.

"Now," said Mrs. Leigh, "I think everything is ready—but the milk in the syllabub, and we won't add that till the last thing. That's the cow, dear, whose milk we are to have," and the old lady pointed to, a pretty little brown and white Alderney grazing at the other end of the field in which the dinner was spread. "She's quite a pet of mine when I'm here; she knows me, my love, as well as you do; now, will you stay here like a good little boy while I just go to the house to help Mrs. Brooke in one or two little matters. The cow won't come this way, I dare

say, but if she does, just say 'sh—sh,' and wave this little stick at her, not beat her you know, and she'll go away directly, she is so sensible, the nice creature! Ah, you should have seen her take her gruel and her medicine last spring when she was poorly. I wish dear Tom would take his half as well when he has a cold; still you'll keep an eye on her for fear poor Maggie should take a fancy to the lettuces, and so do mischief—so good bye for the present, dear, I sha'n't be long."

Ernie sat and looked at the dinner. How nice it looked! "I wonder what's in those pies—currants and raspberries I hope. Perhaps that one's pigeon; yes, there's the claws. I hope it won't be long before Mrs. Leigh comes back. Won't that syllabub be good; there seems everything in it but the milk. Mother never gives us syllabubs. I wonder if Tom has them often. That isn't a large bowl. I wonder Mrs. Leigh didn't have a larger. Why, with all those boys there won't be a taste apiece. I wish that cow would come this way; I think I could milk her; I've seen Ellie milk our Brownie when Mary's been out for a holiday. Oh, I'm sure I could; then I could have a famous glass of syllabub all to myself, and I dare say Mrs. Leigh would think

it very kind of me to have it all ready for her. *That* won't look like being a lazy boy, as that Tom's always calling me, and I shall have the best of the syllabub too."

Now, as if the cow had heard what Ernie said, she came quietly in that direction. "All right," said Ernie; "here Maggie, Maggie," and he gathered a bunch of long grass from the hedge and offered it to Maggie, who began chewing it very deliberately. "Now's my time," said Ernie, and he carefully lifted the bowl in both hands, placed it under the cow, and began trying to milk her. But that wasn't so easy as he had imagined. Cows don't like strange folks about them, especially when those folks don't understand how to treat them. Maggie became very restless, and tried to move away. Ernie held her closer, and at last hurt the poor thing so that she grew quite cross, and fairly kicked him over.

Flat he fell on his back with his heels up in the air, upsetting the bowl as he fell, which poured some of its contents over him, and his head found a pillow in a pie, which, however nice in one sense of the word, certainly was not so as a resting place, for the thin crust gave way under him, and the juice of the fruit poured down his face and on to his very shirt collar.

Poor Ernie was in a pickle now.

Suddenly he heard such a hubbub of voices, for the boys, with grandma and Mr. and Mrs. Brooke at their head, had now come to dinner, and Tom's voice, loud above all, cried out, "Oh, grandma! how could you leave the cow alone in the field? why she's eating up the salad."

"Oh, my dear, I didn't! where's your young friend, that quiet little boy? I asked him to mind her till I came, and Oh, good gracious! look, Oh, what has Maggie done to him?"

"What's he done to Maggie, more likely?" said Tom, as he picked up the syllabub bowl, which luckily was not broken.

Some of the boys ran and picked up Ernie, who, when he wiped the stains off his face and saw the red marks on his handkerchief, cried out that that dreadful cow had killed him, and that he should bleed to death if a doctor was not sent for. But farmer Brooke, who pretty well guessed the truth of the whole matter, told Martha to take him to the house and set him to rights with a little soap and water, which that good creature did, while grandma Leigh, after insisting that they should not wait dinner for her, but begin at once, went off to prepare another bowl of syllabub, of which Ernie, when made decent, was suffered

to partake; and after an excellent dinner he lay down in the hayfield till tea time.

Of course the kettle was boiled in the field, and they all agreed no tea was ever so good as that made that day. Ernie said it was all very well, but, after all, chairs and sofas were more comfortable to sit upon than haycocks, and it was rather awkward doing without a table, as it was such a trouble holding your cup all the time. But, however, he did ample justice to Mrs. Leigh's cakes, and walked home in the cool of the evening with his school-fellows, and told his mother when he got there, that he was really so done up with the hard day's work he had done, that he was sure he should be fit for nothing the next day—and he wasn't.

CHAPTER IV.

ABOUT ERNIE'S VISIT TO THE HARVEST HOME, THE GHOST
IN THE FLOUR BIN, AND HOW SUSAN DAWSON THOUGHT
SHE WAS "CALLED" BUT FOUND SHE WASN'T WANTED.



TOM BROOKE'S father was going to have his harvest home, and Tom, having persuaded his mother to let him invite some of his schoolfellows on the occasion, asked Harry Blake, Willy Ryde, George Nayder, and three or four others, to go over with him the next morning, and spend the day at the farm, he sleeping at his grandmother's the preceding night, on purpose that he might accompany them.

Ernie heard of it, and thinking the party would not be complete without him, told his mother he was going to be one of them, and she, imagining of course that Tom had asked him too, allowed him to go.

They were all to meet at Mrs. Leigh's, and Ernie seeing them proceed past his home and down the road, followed them at a leisurely pace,

not caring to overtake them till they were out of the village. After a bit, he saw them sitting down to rest under the very tree where they had left him on the day of the haymaking. He walked a little quicker, and soon coming up to them, cried out—

“Oh, you lazy fellows! It’s a good thing you’ve got me to stir you up. Who’d think of sitting down here when the harvest wants all the hands that can be got together! Tom, you forgot to bring me your mother’s invitation; but I’m not proud, and so I’ve come on without it. I’ll go with you just the same, my boy, and see if I don’t do the best day’s work of you all.”

Well, of course, Tom, who really was one of the best natured fellows in the world, said—

“All right, my boy; we’ll find a knife and fork for you, and if you’ll only work as well as you’ll eat, you’ll be worth any two of us.”

They did not spend much time under the elm tree, but went on at a good pace till they came to Ashleigh Grange. Here every one was busy as busy could be; Mr. Brooke himself, and all the farm labourers in the field, and the mistress and maids in the house preparing the harvest supper. Mrs. Leigh and Susan had come over to help,—not that the former was likely to do very much, but

Susan was, as Mrs. Leigh said, a treasure at such times. Tom took his friends in to see his mother, and they had some cider and cake to refresh them after their walk, and they then went into the harvest field. Ernie walked away with the rest, and the first thing he did was to look out for a comfortable place to sit down in, nicely in the shade, and where he could overlook the others. Tom took off his jacket, and worked away as hard as a boy could do ; and the other lads did their best to follow his example, but they none of them worked well enough to please Ernie, who sat and found fault with everything they did, which you know was much easier to do than working himself. After a time, the bell rang for dinner, and Mr. Brooke and the boys ran in, followed leisurely by Ernie, who knew he was sure of a good place at the table.

He was very much disappointed when he found the dinner, though a very good and plentiful one, was cold—Mrs. Brooke having so arranged that the maids might have more time that day for the harvest supper. However, her hams, her veal pies, and above all, her collared beef, were not things for any hungry schoolboy to despise ; and, as there were capital salads and splendid cucumbers, Ernie managed to make a dinner—at least,

what anybody else would have thought one. They then all went back to the field ; as they had begun to cart, the gleaners were admitted to the field, and Tom began gleaning himself, to get a better bundle for his old nurse, who was one of them. The other boys came and helped him.

Ernie seeing this, said superciliously—

“What a deal you are getting, to be sure! You don’t half know how to go to work—I’ll get more than all of you put together.”

So he walked along by the hedges, one hand in his pockets, and with the other pulling a few ears of corn here and there off them. The other boys soon made a nice little heap, and having put it together, ran off to the other side of the field, Tom having first tied it round with his necktie, to show that it was private property. The old lady for whom they had been so busy was working away at a little distance, and knew nothing of this till Ernie untied the little sheaf, put the necktie in his pocket, and gave her the corn. How she did thank him, to be sure! Of all the nice, pretty, sweet-spoken little gentlefolks, she thought Master Ernie to be one of the best ; and when she saw Tom she told him so, pointing out what he had done for her. Tom was rather sur-

prised at his diligence, but thought it very kind of Ernie.

"There's some good in the fellow, after all," he said, as he went to fetch the old lady what he had collected for her; but necktie and corn had both gone. As he never suspected Ernie of playing him such a trick, he supposed some of the gleaners had helped themselves to his bundle of gleanings, necktie and all. He was very much vexed about the loss of the latter, as it was a nice new one, and his mother would say he had no business to have put it to such a use. However, he set to work gleaning again for Mrs. Jones, and Ernie came up to him, saying—

"Not got anything yet for the old lady, Tom! Only see what I've given her—I told you I'd get more than all of you put together. Oh, by the bye, how careless you are with your things. Here's your new necktie I found lying about on the field."

Tom looked at his necktie, and then at Ernie, and began to suspect something of the true state of the case, but thought he would say nothing until he was sure he had robbed him, "When I'll soon square accounts if I find he has." He told his schoolfellows some one had made free with their gleanings, and they must help him to collect some more for his old nurse.

Ernie sauntered away, saying—

“ I shall go back to the house, now, and see if I can be of any use there.”

He walked on, as he had said, to the house, and finding the front door open, entered and looked about him, to see where he should be best off. He heard Susan's voice through a door that opened into the large hall, and thought he had better go and see her, for he had a very pleasant recollection of her little attentions to him when he paid a visit to Mrs. Leigh. So he followed the sound, and entered into the kitchen, where he found Susan very busily engaged in making pies.

Mr. Brooke's kitchen was a famous place, decorated in true farmer fashion, with hams and sides of bacon ; it was very large and lofty, and the window, or rather glass door at the end, looked pleasantly enough over a famous kitchen garden and orchard—a capital view for such an apartment, as it was so pleasant to see the fruit and vegetables growing all ready to be cooked and eaten. The door by which Ernie had entered, opened into the large hall, and another door led into a great stone scullery. The house was a very roomy and old fashioned one, and in former times the “ Squire ” of the village, who then farmed his own land, had lived there. But, fifty years ago,

the gentleman who owned it, thought it too plain and homely to suit him any longer, so he built himself a fine new mansion, all red brick, and straight narrow windows, very stiff, and prim, and ugly, and left the picturesque, many-gabled, ivy-covered Grange, which then, with five hundred acres of good land, was rented by Mr. Brooke's father, and had been occupied by the family ever since.

The hall had in former times been the ordinary sitting room, but as it was thought too cold and draughty for modern notions of comfort, it was now only used as an entrance—and a very noble one it made—except on rare occasions, Christmas times, harvest homes, and the like, when Mr. Brooke feasted his labourers, and those of the neighbours of the better class, who came to share in the merrymakings. Some of these latter being expected to-night, Mrs. Brooke and her mother were busy in the dining room, arranging china and cutting cake for the tea table, and, as Susan had been installed in the kitchen, they knew things would be sure to go right there. I don't know which moved fastest, Susan's fingers or her tongue. How fast she rolled her paste, and how fast she talked! It wants a quick light hand for pastry, but Susan seemed to think it wanted a

quick loud voice to match. She stood at the large table in the middle of the kitchen, and Madge and Jenny, the two maids, were peeling apples for her. On a side table lay an enormous piece of beef for roasting, another for boiling, and three or four savoury meat pies she had just completed, ready for baking. A large basket of potatoes and other vegetables stood near for the maids to prepare for cooking. Altogether, for anyone who liked good things, the kitchen of Ashleigh Grange that day had a very pleasant appearance. Ernie thought so, I can tell you, as he looked around him. He walked up to Susan, and asked her in his politest manner, and Ernie could be very polite when he pleased, how she was, and if he could be of any use to her in the way of peeling apples or anything else. No, Susan told him, she had plenty of help, and she thought he would be better in the harvest field. "Ah!" said Ernie, sitting down in the cushioned Windsor chair, by the fireside, "you don't know what hard work harvesting is, Mrs. Dawson." Susan liked to be called "Mrs. Dawson"—it was a little weakness of hers—so she felt rather more tolerant of Ernie's presence in the kitchen, than she did before. He went on: "I'm afraid you've had no time to take care of yourself, Mrs. Dawson.

I daresay you've never sat down to a bit of dinner, now have you?"

"Well, as far as sitting down goes, I don't know that I have," replied Susan. "I've just had a crust and a glass of ale, but busy folks have no time for eating in the midst of their work."

"No," said Ernie, gravely shaking his head, "but other people should take care of those who don't think for themselves." He looked very intently at the piece of roasting beef on the table. "You must eat, Mrs. Dawson, you must eat, you know, or you'll break down, and then what will become of the supper. If anything goes wrong with you, it'll upset the whole affair." He looked at the fire thoughtfully. "That's nice and clear—just the fire for a steak, Mrs. Dawson." He looked at the beef. "One could easily cut a slice from that, that wouldn't spoil the look of the joint at all." Ernie secured a carving knife, and went towards the meat.

"Bless the child! what's he after now?" cried Susan, and the two maids stopped in the midst of their work to see what Ernie was after. "Now don't go spoiling the beef, and cutting your own fingers. Drat the girls!" Susan turned angrily on Madge and Jenny. "What are they staring at? I should like to know when those apples will

be peeled at this rate! Now, whatever is that little creature after?" she added, as Ernie advanced toward the fire, with a splendid steak in one hand, weighing at least a pound, and the gridiron in the other. "Now pray don't distress yourself, Mrs. Dawson," said Ernie; "it's no trouble at all, I assure you, and I'll soon have the steak cooked to a turn. Here, Jenny, let's have a couple of plates—put them to the fire—that's right; now the knives and forks, for just to keep you company, Mrs. Dawson, I don't mind taking a bit myself. I couldn't eat much at dinner time. Cold meat never *does* suit me. You haven't got such a thing as a pickled walnut in the place, have you? It *is* such an improvement to a steak, Mrs. Dawson, and I should like to see you enjoying this. Now it's done to a T. You'll say so, when you taste it. Do sit down, Mrs. Dawson, and let's have it in comfort."

Susan stood with her rolling pin in her hand, and stared first at Ernie, and then at the steak. The latter certainly did him credit; it was brown and not burned, and the rich gravy was oozing from it, just as it should. Having dined, Master Ernie could afford to be generous, so with wonderful impartiality, he cut the steak in half, popped one portion on Susan's plate, and the

other on his own. "Now do eat it while it's hot, Mrs. Dawson. We haven't got the pepper, Jenny; thank you." Ernie began the attack on his own, and Susan saying, "Bless the boy! he's the queerest little thing I ever knew," glanced at the clock, and muttering, "Well, I can spare five minutes, and as it is cooked, it'll be a shame not to eat it," sat down to the table. She had scarcely taken a mouthful, when she heard Mrs. Brooke's voice, calling on Jenny and Madge to bring down chairs from the upstairs rooms. They ran off at once. "I'll lay," said Susan, "they'll never know how to place them right, and as to fixing the tables, nobody ever *does* know how to do that here but me. I'll just pop this in the oven, my dear, for two minutes, and run and see how they are getting on." She went off, and Ernie continued his repast. Presently he heard Tom's voice—he listened with a morsel suspended on his fork. "Does anyone know where that young scamp Ernie is?"

"My dear, my dear," said grandma Leigh, who was now busy in the hall, "is that the way you speak of your young friends? you really shouldn't use such expressions."

"Oh, grandma, the little sneak went and stole all our gleanings, and palmed them off on Nurse

Jones as his own. Little Bob Wrey saw him, and has just told me all about it. I'll give him a good trouncing when I catch him, see if I don't."

Ernie heard Tom coming towards the kitchen, and feeling frightened—for when Tom *was* angry, and the very sound of his voice showed that he was so now, it was no joke—looked about him for a hiding place. Near the kitchen window, at right angles with that and the dresser, stood a bin about four feet high. The lid was open, and it occurred to Ernie that, with the help of a chair, he might find shelter here. He ran towards it, and in another minute was out of sight, and the lid pulled down over him.

"I'll get out when he's gone, and finish that steak," he thought, as he clambered in ; "Jenny'll help me; I know—she seems a good-natured sort of a girl."

Down, down he sank on something soft and yielding.

"Oh, my goodness," thought Ernie, "whatever's this at the bottom? It looked empty as I opened the lid. I do believe it's flour! And I've got my best brown suit on ; oh, won't it be pepper-and-salt now !—only a good deal more salt than pepper."

There was a little crack to which he applied his

eye, and through which he saw Tom come in and look about him as he muttered—"I do believe he's been here stuffing again—getting over Susan I suppose, to give him some steak. Here, Towzer, Towzer!"

A great black Newfoundland came bounding in, and Ernie had the mortification of seeing him devour his own juicy, tender tid-bit. "Well," he said to himself, "of all the mean creatures, I think *that* Tom's one of the worst. To ask a fellow to dinner, give him nothing but a cold one, and then grudge him a morsel of beef steak! Ugh! you brute, licking your lips like that! Do you think I took the trouble to broil that for you? I'll get out as soon as they're gone and finish Susan's, if she don't come back. I'll tell her the oven dried it up so, I thought she'd better have a nice fresh piece."

Susan did not return so speedily as she expected to have done; but as Tom left the kitchen, which he did as soon as his dog had finished the steak, his mother came in to get something out of her own store cupboard. Glancing round to see how things were going on, she saw the key still in the padlock of the flour bin, and as it was one of her rules that that should always be kept locked, she looked in the tub to see if Susan had

a sufficient supply, and finding she had, locked the bin, and put the key in her pocket.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" thought Ernie; "how shall I ever get out of this hole? What will become of me? And if that Tom only finds me here, I shall never hear the last of it. If I can only get hold of Susan or Jenny; but then how will they get the key out of Mrs. Brooke's pocket? I must wait a bit, and see what chance there is for me."

After a while, Susan returned with Jenny and Madge. "Ah, that little fellow's taken himself off, I see—finished his steak, though," she said, and taking out her own, proceeded to eat it.

Ernie was anxious to attract her attention, but wished her to be alone, or with only Jenny, as he wanted his misadventure to be kept as quiet as possible; but there was no chance for him. For first one came in, and then another—the kitchen the whole of that afternoon was a continuous scene of bustle. Madge's sister and Jenny's cousin came in to help peel potatoes; one of the farm boys was cleaning knives in the scullery, and for ever poking his head in the kitchen to chat with the girls. Tom himself came in once or twice, and Mrs. Brooke was in and out repeatedly. At last Ernie saw the tea making, and the pikelets toast-

ing; he smelt them, and groaned as he thought what a little chance he had of doing more than smell,—“Though, perhaps,” he thought, “I may have a chance when they’re all at tea; but I hope they won’t eat the pikelets up first—what a plateful! There *ought* to be some left for me; but drat that Tom—he always eats enough for a dozen.” The meat, which had been put to the fire by this, now began to make Ernie’s mouth water. “Well, there’ll be a famous good supper, at any rate—but, oh dear, whatever are they all doing in this place?”

His chance of getting out seemed worse than ever, for Madge and Jenny, and their cousins, sat down with Susan to tea, and two or three of the lads about the farm came in to get bread and cheese, and stood and gossiped with the girls while they ate it, in spite of Susan telling them to be off, and not din her head so with their noise. Tom himself came in to ask Susan if she had seen anything of Ernie. “No,” she replied, “I left him here by the fire while I went to help with the tables, and when I came back, found him gone, and his bit of steak eaten; so I supposed he had gone out by that door into the garden, and so into the fields.”

“Oh,” said Tom, “Towzer disposed of his steak.

I expect he ran off as soon as he heard me coming. I meant to give him a lesson for cheating me out of my gleanings, so I suppose he walked off home to save himself. Well, he'll lose his supper at any rate, which will just serve him right!"

Tom left the kitchen, and Ernie groaned to himself as he thought of the possibility of Tom's words coming true respecting the harvest supper. "Oh, if I only get out of this," he thought, "catch me ever being good-natured; and helping old women glean again! As to that Tom, what a fellow means by behaving as he's done the whole of this day, I can't think. He's a pretty friend! Oh dear, this flour!—my boots are full of it! It's getting into my very eyes, and it's all down my collar. I do believe they've finished tea! Yes, here come the things, and the pikelet plates are empty. Oh, that Tom! hasn't he had a tuck in?"

Susan set Jenny and Madge to wash up the tea things, and continued herself by the fire, watching the progress of the supper, for there was plenty for all to do. Presently, Ernie heard the shouts of the farming men, as they brought home the last load with Tom perched in triumph on the top, waving his hat, and calling Hurrah! with all his might.

"Be quick, girls! be quick!" said Susan; "they'll soon be in, and as ready for their suppers as so many wolves! My mind misgives me, this pudding is hardly boiled enough!"

"Pudding!" thought Ernie; "I didn't know of that. Plum, I'll answer for it! Oh, I must get out of this: I shall choke if I stop here much longer! Oh!—I say!—Susan!—Mrs. Dawson!"

"Oh, mercy!" cried Jenny, "I'm sure I heard a voice in the flour bin."

"Pack o' rubbish!" cried Susan, who was too busy with her supper to hear Ernie's faint cry. "Just put the meat plates down to warm, and don't let's have any such stuff."

"I must cry louder," thought Ernie. "I must get out now, if ever, or I shan't have a chance of supper. At any rate, that Tom's out of the house, and if I ask them, I dare say the girls will keep quiet, and give me a brush down. Susan must make some excuse to get the key of the bin from Mrs. Brooke, and perhaps she can get me some of Tom's things, and set these to rights for me to-morrow. I think Mr. Brooke ought to give me a new suit, this'll never look well again; and it's his flour that's spoilt it." So Ernie called a little louder, "Susan! Susan! Susan!"

"My gracious!" said Jenny, "I'm sure I heard it then. Now didn't you, that time, Mrs. Dawson?"

"Well, I heard something," said Susan, looking rather alarmed. "I won't deny it; but——"

"Susan!" called Ernie again; but his voice had a faint peculiar sound, for the bin was made of thick well-seasoned wood, and he was afraid besides of being heard by others than Susan and the girls, if he called too loudly.

Susan sank in a chair. "I heard it then!" she said; "it's my name, and it's me that's wanted! I'm called!" She shook her head gravely. "I always felt, if I was to go afore my missis, I should have a sign that I might let her know in good time I should have to leave her. Well, keep away from the bin, all of you; do not show any disrespect to whatsoever it is that's a calling me! I'll see to the supper just the same. I haven't served Mrs. Leigh forty years to spoil her son and daughter's Harvest Home at last! They're coming in now, Jenny, so we'll begin to dish up. I'll see to the roast; you and Madge attend to the potatoes and pies. We'll have it all in in five minutes."

The smell of the pies, as they came from the oven, was too much for Ernie's patience. He began again, "Susan! Susan!"

Susan went on with her dishing up. "Don't take no notice," she said, solemnly; "when I've sent in the pudding, I'll go home by myself, as was arranged I should, and place my things all straight and ready. Don't none of you say a word to Mrs. Leigh; I'll tell her myself in the morning when she comes home. Then I'll count up the silver, and go over the linen and china with her, and then take to my bed and send for the parson; the doctor'll be no use. When one's called, one must go, and all the doctors in the world can't keep one!"

"Drat that old woman!" said Ernie to himself, "she thinks I'm a ghost; silly old creature! I'll try a little louder—Susan! Susan! Mrs. Dawson!"

"I shall faint," said Jenny, deliberately setting down the dish of potatoes she was about to carry in, and falling back in a chair preparatory to doing so; "I never heard anything so awful in my life."

"Faint as much as you like when supper's over," said Susan, sternly; "I'm not going to have any such weakness now; I know what those three calls mean, so loud and clear. I'm not to be much longer here: but I'll do my duty to the last, and send this supper in as it should be."

Madge and the other girls, though scared and frightened, were ashamed to give in when they saw Susan's firmness; and, as two of the farm servants came into the kitchen to carry the heavy dishes into the hall, they felt a little more reassured, though very glad that they were required to act as waitresses instead of remaining in the kitchen. Jenny, who acted on all ordinary occasions as the cook of the household, still kept there; and Ernie began to hope he might have a quiet opportunity of emerging from his prison. But to his great annoyance the kitchen became a scene of more bustle than ever—for half a dozen old women—pensioners of Mrs. Brooke, who had nothing to do with the harvest, having neither sons nor husbands employed on it to give them a title to the supper table, which was sufficiently crowded without them—had been kindly told that they might come and sup with the house servants in the kitchen. Ernie peeped out at them—"There's that old creature Jones, that brought me into this mess through my foolish good nature to her. My goodness! I do believe she and all the others are coming to the supper too. Well, when they've had theirs, I should like to know what'll be left for me. I shall be starved if I stop here much longer. Oh! there's Susan taking up the pudding.

It's not so big as it might be. If I ain't quick, it'll be gone before I've a chance of a slice. Susan!"

Susan stood with the steaming pudding suspended in mid air by the ends of the cloth that held it. She shook her head again, and said, softly—"Don't say nothing to the poor old creatures, Jenny. They don't often have a good supper, and I should like them to enjoy this."

"Susan!" cried Ernie, again, but his voice was drowned now in the clatter of plates and knives and forks that came from the hall through the half-open kitchen door; and presently the girls came, bearing in the dishes very much lightened of their load, and John Cray—Jenny's sweetheart—who had taken in the roast, now came to fetch the enormous plum-pudding. Ernie got desperate when he saw him slowly bearing it away. Come what would, some of that pudding he must have: so gathering up all his force of lungs into one despairing cry, he burst forth—"Ow—ow—Susan, Susan, Susan!"

John turned with the pudding still in his great red hands; and Jenny, who thought it too good an opportunity of playing the interesting to be lost, and who besides was really frightened, flung herself back on a chair, crying, "Oh dear, oh

dear; it's too much. I can't bear it any longer."

John looked at his sweetheart and then at the pudding, which was very hot and heavy, and was about to set it down that he might the better comfort Jenny, whom the old women, all panic struck and wondering, came crowding round; but Susan, fully equal to the occasion, waved him away, and placing the fruit pies in the hands of Madge and the other girls, desired them to proceed at once into the hall. John advanced a step or two with the pudding, when Ernie again sent forth his cry, "Susan!" and Jane, — now thoroughly scared — sent forth a shrill scream that shook the stout heart of John Cray to the very centre, and what was worse, shook his strong arms as well, beneath their mighty burden, and made it fall.

The crash, and the screaming that followed, were heard in the hall; but in the kitchen, above all the uproar, Ernie's voice was audible as he saw the ruin of that pudding he had so long hoped for. "Ow—ow—ow," resounded from the bin, and pies and plates followed the pudding's fate, and the frightened old women and girls rushed from the neighbourhood of the ghostly voice, and into the hall.

Mr. Brooke, Tom, Mrs. Brooke, and her mother, followed by a large number of their guests, arose from the table, and proceeded to the kitchen, to ascertain if they could what had so scared the maids and spoiled the supper.

Of course you've read in your History of Rome about Marius sitting amidst the ruins of Carthage. I don't consider in moral grandeur he was at all equal to Susan Dawson amongst the ruins of that plum pudding. She took a clean dish, and having warmed it, proceeded, with a pair of spoons, to place the broken fragments of pudding upon it, in the best order she might. The pies she gave up as hopeless; but there were more in the oven—if only the pudding could be saved, the supper would not be a failure after all. She went on steadily in her praiseworthy efforts, and having placed what she could save of the pudding in the dish, and that in the oven to keep hot, she turned to Mr. Brooke, and said, as she began collecting what plates remained unbroken from the floor, "If you'll take your seat at the table again, sir, and tell those silly girls to come and help me, I'll soon have things to rights. It's nothing but that stupid John Cray that's done all the mischief."

"But what is it that frightened him so?" said

Tom; "what's all this about a voice from the flour bin?"

"It's all a nothing," replied Susan, stoutly, "but a pack of silly creatures sweethearting and chattering when they ought to be doing their business, and minding their work."

Jane fired up at this. John stood stupidly still; but Jenny had a tongue of her own when need be: "Well, I'm sure, Mrs. Dawson, you know as well as any one that there's been enough going on in this kitchen the whole of the evening to frighten any one out of their senses. I won't stop in the place, I know, if ghostesses and all sorts of queer sounds are to come in the flour bins, and scare one out of one's wits, and then one's to be found fault with. I should like to know who's to make bread with that flour when a ghost's been in it? The dough 'll be as heavy as lead, and I shall get all the blame."

"Where's the key of the flour bin?" said Mr. Brooke.

"Here," replied his wife, producing it from her pocket.

"It's all up," thought Ernie; "I'm in for it now."

Mr. Brooke advanced to the bin, unlocked it, and looked in. At first there appeared to be

nothing but flour, for Ernie was white all over, and had curled himself up into a ball at the bottom. Tom came and looked too, and then fetched a candle. "There's something," said he, "besides flour. We'll soon have the ghost out, and see what he's like. Here, Towzer, Towzer—seize him, good dog!" But Towzer's name was enough for Ernie, who remembered the great teeth that had devoured his steak, and scrambling out of the bin, even more quickly than he had jumped in, ran to Mrs. Leigh for protection; but she, thinking of her rich black silk, drew away from him, and the old women, taking this as a sign of fear, set up a cry, in which many of the younger ones joined, of "The ghost!" "The ghost!" and rushed out into the hall.

"Whoever is it?" said Mr. Brooke, for Ernie's face was undistinguishable, owing to the flour. "Here, you sir, tell me at once who you are, and what you mean by playing the fool in this manner?"

"Oh, I know him," said Tom, "he's my friend, Ernie Elton. Well, young one, what have you got to say for yourself?"

Susan looked at Ernie intently. "Then I haven't been called after all! Well, it's a great relief to my mind. But whatever did that

blessed child hide himself in the flour bin for? Why his own mother wouldn't know him! And as to his clothes, they'll never be fit to be seen."

Ernie surveyed himself ruefully. "No, I don't think they will. A nice day I've had of it! Oh, Tom! I should be ashamed to call myself any fellow's friend, and treat him as you've treated me. Here I've come to give you all the help I could in your harvest, and you've frightened me out of my senses, and into a flour bin, where I've spoilt my Sunday suit, and lost my supper, because I was good natured enough to save you the trouble of carrying your trumpery gleanings to Mrs. Jones. A nice thing to make a fuss about! I suppose my father'll come upon yours for some more clothes for me, for I can't wear these to church any more, and they were to last me a twelvemonth, and it's all through your dog and you frightening me into this nasty bin, where I've been choking the whole of the afternoon."

It would have done you good to have heard the peals of laughter from every one while Ernie was speaking, but it made him quite cross, and, turning snappishly round, he said, "Ah, it's very well for you to laugh, but I think I've been very badly treated. I'm an ill-used boy."

"So you are, Ernie," said Mr. Brooke, "by

your own account at any rate. Well, make friends with Jenny here, to give you some water to wash with, and some of Tom's things to put on. It's not the first time you've borrowed them, and then Susan will give you some supper."

"I'm sure I want it," said Ernie, "for I feel famished. You'll save me some pudding, Susan, please, and a nice slice of the roast beef. I don't care for boiled," he added, as he walked off with Jenny into the scullery, to get rid of the flour from his face, as he certainly was not in a fit state to be taken over carpeted stairs, and into tidy bedrooms.

In a quarter of an hour he came into the kitchen, all spruce and clean, and then, preferring to sup there, as he said he should have it in peace, and, though he didn't care much for eating, he liked to have what little he took in quiet, sat down to a small round table, spread for him by the fire, and having finished as hearty a meal as ever boy ate, went home with his schoolfellows by the clear light of the harvest moon.

CHAPTER V.

HOW ERNIE WENT BLACKBERRYING, HIS ADVENTURES WITH
THE GIPSIES, AND HIS NEW AND ORIGINAL TOILET.



SUPPOSE I need hardly say that Mrs. Leigh was a first-rate hand at making jam. Not that she cared to eat it herself, but her dear Tom was very partial to preserves, and so were most of his young friends, and the blackberries being now ripe, her grandson had suggested that he and some of his school-fellows should form a party for the purpose of gathering them in sufficient quantity for preserving. They took advantage of Michaelmas Day, which was always a whole holiday at Dr. Day's school, for the purpose, and assembled betimes at Mrs. Leigh's, who was to supply them with the materials for a good cold dinner, that no time might be lost in coming home to eat it, and who invited them to tea when the blackberrying was over.

All this seemed pleasant enough, and as the day was very bright and sunny, the lads started off in good spirits to walk to Beech Wood, where they had heard that a famous crop of blackberries was to be had for the gathering. Ernie had been invited to be of the party, and had at first refused, saying that he considered it a terrible bore to go so far for a little fruit ; but his mother insisted on his joining them, and he became a little more reconciled to the idea when he thought of the cold provisions Mrs. Leigh was to furnish for dinner, and the famous tea she would be sure to have ready for them ; so as he did not get up in time to meet them at her house, they called for him as they passed, and found him just sitting down to his breakfast, which his mother made him leave, and, as she had done before, be content with a piece of bread in his hand, saying it was all he deserved for his indolence in not rising sooner. Ernie looked very miserable as he came out, and informed Tom that he didn't see how he could be expected to do a good day's work, when he was sent out without any breakfast, and enquired whether Mrs. Leigh had provided for dinner.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Tom. "If you've any anxiety on the subject, only wait till

one, and you'll learn all about it. No! we don't have the baskets looked into, if you please; but as I see you want to be useful, you can carry the hookey sticks. There now, come along; and if you are only as clever at blackberrying, as you are at gleaning, my grandmother's jam pots will be all full to-morrow."

The boys went on; singing, whistling, chattering and laughing. There were a round dozen of them, and as merry, noisy a crew as ever tried a master's or a mother's patience. But Ernie was sober and silent, for the loss of his breakfast weighed heavily on his mind, and he felt it very unkind of Tom to keep so sharp an eye upon the baskets; he might at least have allowed him a look. Beech Wood was a long two miles off, and not far from Mr. Brooke's farm; but the boys soon reached it, and the real business of the day began. A great many of the trees from which it took its name had long been cut down, and the stumps alone remained, but between these numbers of fine blackberry bushes had sprung up, the open space being very sunny, while the remaining trees in the hedges sheltered it from the cold winds; so the fruit here was always finer, riper, and more juicy than anywhere else. The baskets began to fill rapidly: Ernie himself gathered at least a

dozen blackberries, and then, exhausted with the effort, sat down, with a heavy sigh, upon the remains of what had once been a fine beech. "Oh, come," said Tom, "that won't do at all, you ain't going to give in yet; we're going further on now, and think of looking for some in the wood. So just get up, and come along with us."

"I can't stir," said Ernie, "I'm done up. You don't consider I've had no breakfast through my being so unlucky as to oversleep myself this morning: you're so unfeeling, you won't allow me any lunch. No; I'll tell you what I'll do. If you'll just give me a snack, one or two meat pies, or a slice of ham and a bit of bread, I'll stay here and take care of the blackberries and the dinner. That'll be much better than your lugging all these baskets about, and it will suit me very well."

Tom thought on the whole it would not be a bad plan; the baskets were heavy, and they could get on much quicker if they emptied all their berries into the largest one, and took the remainder to fill; and Mrs. Leigh's ample store of provisions was rather an incumbrance, while they certainly would not be greatly benefited by what fruit Ernie gathered. So they agreed that they would all sit down and have lunch with him, and put him on his honour not to touch the remainder of

the provisions, which injunction he promised faithfully to obey, intending really to keep his word—not a very difficult matter, considering the amount he was then consuming.

Tom and his troop went away, and were soon in the recesses of the wood, where in the more open spaces, they found plenty of blackberry bushes loaded with ripe glowing fruit. Some of them had brought bags for nuts, and here there were plenty for the gathering. I don't know pleasanter work for stout, healthy, hearty boys, than nutting and blackberrying on a fine autumn day, when the trees are in their richest garb, wearing a glory and a beauty to which the summer green is nothing, lovely as it is. These lads certainly found it so; they thoroughly enjoyed themselves, and were so intent on filling both bag and basket, that they never gave a thought to dinner, till it was long past the time they had promised to return; and they began to feel both tired and hungry.

Ernie, however, whose ideas of enjoyment were rather unlike those of his companions, looked out as soon as they were gone for a resting-place where he could be more thoroughly at his ease than on the beech stumps where they had left him. He soon found one—a nice, soft, mossy piece of ground gently sloping down, shaded

slightly by a sapling whose leaves were just sufficient to soften pleasantly the rays of the autumn sun. By a prodigious effort he carried the black-berry basket to this spot, and the three others that contained the dinner, then laid himself down full length at his ease, feeling convinced that he had done a hard morning's work, and had quite earned a right to make himself snug and comfortable.

As he lay with his head resting on his arms, he could see the lane that wound along that side of the Beech Wood, and led to the high road to London. Now and then a country girl passed along it, or two or three children on their way from school, and once in a while a cart or a wagon from some farmers came slowly on; but there were not many signs of human life about—just enough to prevent his feeling lonely—and he could see at a little distance the wild rabbits running to and fro their holes; and the saucy robins, boldest and most privileged of birds, would perch themselves on some neighbouring twig and peer at him with their bright black eyes. It was really a thoroughly bright, pleasant, enjoyable day, and every one—birds, rabbits, and boys—seemed all to feel it so. I can tell you Ernie did, as much as any one, as he lay there basking in the sun.

"Very nice," he murmured to himself; "very nice day, indeed. I wonder how those others are getting on. I hope they'll remember to come back when it's dinner time. There's not one of them got a watch; but no sensible fellow ought to want one to remind him of his meals. I think I'll take a nap. I didn't rest well last night, and they never will let me have my morning's sleep in peace—it's worry, worry, bell, bell, knock, knock, just as if it signified a farthing whether one got one's breakfast at ten or at nine. They might be sure I should get it at some time or the other: I'm not the boy to forget my meals. Well, I'll turn over now for a few minutes; I shall feel all the fresher for it when I wake."

So Ernie turned over, and was very soon fast asleep. Some tramps or gipsies, who did not bear the best character in the place, being more than suspected not only of poaching from the preserves of the Lord of the Manor, but also of pilfering from the farmer's poultry yard, had been advised by the police that, unless they wished certain doubtful little matters to be very closely inquired into, they had better move from the farther side of Beech Wood, where they had taken up their quarters, and settle in another parish, the farther off the better. They were not too proud to take

the hint, and had packed it that very day, with the intention of travelling a dozen miles before pitching their tents again at nightfall. Most of their goods were conveyed in a large covered cart, drawn by two wretched-looking horses, outside which conveyance hung a motley array of baskets, mops, and brooms, the sale of which formed a ready excuse for approaching dwelling houses and watching what they could lay their hands on. Two or three of the women and smaller children rode in front of this conveyance, one man drove, the other walked by the side, while half a dozen sturdy urchins of both sexes ran before. These imps, as they came down the lane, spied Ernie and cautiously approached him. Considerate creatures! seeing what a sweet sleep he was enjoying, they crept up like so many cats, for fear of waking him. Then their sharp black eyes caught sight of the baskets, which their nimble fingers stealthily opened, and then, after a rapid and very satisfactory examination of the contents, they began discussing them. Oh, if good old Mrs. Leigh and Susan could but have foreseen to what a fate their savoury pork pies, tempting veal patties, and delicious cheesecakes would arrive, they would never have prepared them with the pride and care they did. Happily for them,

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they were ignorant for a time at least; but one gipsy girl, younger and more incautious than the rest, gave vent to her satisfaction in a chuckle of such intense delight as, for the first time in her life, a raspberry jam puff melted on her palate, that Ernie was effectually awoke; and, starting up scared and surprised, saw what he at first imagined to be so many goblins, come—how or whence he was afraid to think—to steal the treasures entrusted to his care, and perhaps make away with himself. He rubbed his eyes and sat upright; he stared at the young gipsies, and they stopped eating, and stared back at him. Presently, as he became conscious that they were really only mortal boys and girls he had to deal with, he broke forth into one of his most indignant howls. “Ow—ow—ow—you little wretches. What do you mean by stealing my provisions like this? Give me those baskets directly, I say, or I’ll make you feel the difference. You abominable little creatures, what do you mean by it?” Here seeing that the girl whose laughter awoke him was about to help herself to a delicious-looking piece of rich plum cake, he flew at her, tore it from her hands, and, without any regard to the politeness due to a lady, began cuffing her unmercifully.

He had better have let her alone. The whole

troop set on him, tooth and nail, and he had to defend himself as best he might. To do him justice, Ernie, when fairly roused, could fight as well as most boys of his age, and he certainly fought well now. But what could he do against half a dozen sturdy little half-savage vagrants, who had been bred to blows and buffets from their cradles? He was fast getting the worst of it, when the cart and the elder gipsies arrived, and the affectionate parents, seeing their amiable offspring engaged in this spirited scuffle, hastened down to make sure they were not overmatched, and were very soon set at ease on that score.

The brats left off fighting when their fathers and mothers came up, but seized the baskets, and, grinning savagely at Ernie, gave him to understand he need never expect to possess himself of the contents. The women clamorously demanded the cause of the affray, which was readily explained to them by the youngsters; while Ernie indignantly demanded that his property should be given up to him, and compensation made for what had been eaten. The gipsies laughed at this; in fact, the wild community seemed to enjoy the joke amazingly, and began dipping their hands in the baskets, and evidently appreciated the contents quite as much as they deserved. This was

too much for Ernie, he burst out indignantly, "You good-for-nothing scaramouches, I'll set the police on you, see if I don't! Do you think those delicious pies were ever made for you? I'll go to Mr. Brooke, of Ashleigh Grange, and tell him how you've been stealing his son's dinner. Give me my property back, I say, or it will be worse for you."

The gipsies looked a little disconcerted at the mention of Mr. Brooke's name. In fact, they had been rather too particular in their attentions to Mrs. Brooke's poultry, and it was principally at her husband's suggestion that the police had so politely intimated that their presence could be dispensed with at Waythorne parish. They whispered together. If they really had stolen anything further from Mr. Brooke or his son, and the police were set on their track, there might be a few articles discovered in the cart which they would rather not have found there. It would suit them much better that this last little affair should not come to Mr. Brooke's notice till they were safely out of his parish at least, and where they could not so easily be traced.

They were not long in coming to a decision—in fact Ernie obliged them to be quick, for he began calling "Police—murder—Tom, come and

save your dinner—police—Mr. Brooke—Tom—murder—murder,” and they were afraid that his cries would be heard, and that they might be stopped at once, so two of them sprang on him, pinioned his arms, and tied a handkerchief so tightly over his mouth, that it was as much as he could do to breathe, let alone call for assistance. Then they carried him to the cart, secured his legs so that he could not kick, and thereby injure their valuable property, and bundled him up in a corner, with very little regard to his comfort—their only object being his security.

The women and children took the baskets—not forgetting the one that held the blackberries—packed them also in the cart, and away they all went at as brisk a pace as the half-starved horses could be made to go.

I need hardly say that Ernie’s was just one of those cases where the feelings may, as they say, be “better imagined than described.” He would have been very glad indeed to have found himself back in Mr. Brooke’s flour bin, or even seated on the donkey in the middle of the pond. He made up his mind to be murdered as soon as the gipsies had a convenient opportunity; and the thought that they would not only kill him, but devour his dinner, gave additional bitterness to his fate.

On they went, mile after mile. "Ah! they're only waiting for night to come," he thought, "that's all. Oh! dear, oh! dear, I think they'll wish at home they'd let me have my breakfast this morning. I suppose they'll stick me like they do the pigs. I wonder if it hurts much. Oh! Tom, Tom, you little know what I'm going through for your sake. I daresay he's wondering now what's become of his dinner. He'll never know what became of that or me either."

The gipsies stopped at last on a lonely common, untied the horses and let them graze, and sat down to eat their dinner—or rather Ernie's and his schoolfellows'. Ernie could see them as he sat at the back of the cart, for they had raised the tarpaulin that covered it, to reach the baskets, and had not cared to lower it again, it being so secluded a place there was no one likely to see their prisoner. He had the mortification of witnessing them devour all that remained of Mrs. Leigh's tempting provisions, and was not even able to open his mouth to remonstrate. He looked round him—the place was very far away, apparently, from any human habitation—as likely a spot as any for an evil deed to be committed in. Was there no chance? If he could only speak to ask them to have pity on him!

They seemed to be talking about him now, for their looks were all directed to him, and presently a couple of women came towards him. "It's all up now," thought Ernie; "I suppose the men are too lazy after their dinner, and have told those women—horrid wretches!—to despatch me."

The women came, and began to laugh as they untied him. Then they took him out of the cart and made him stand on his feet. They looked curiously at his clothes, and then said something apart to each other. The end of it was, that they called up two lads, about Ernie's size, and made them change clothes with him. One had his trowsers and cap, for which he gave him a wretched old pair of knickerbockers, and a morsel of straw, the remains of an old bonnet, to cover his head with. The other had his jacket and waistcoat, and presented him in return with a couple of garments, as full of holes and tatters as any articles of clothing could be that held together at all. This exchange seemed to give all the gipsies the utmost satisfaction, as they all laughed heartily when it had taken place. Then they told Ernie to start off and make the best of his way home, and to give their compliments to Mrs. Brooke, who, they imagined, had prepared the provisions they had made so free with, and to

say that they had enjoyed their dinner very much.

Away Ernie went, as fast as his feet would carry him. But he was quite ignorant which path to take to get into the high road, so that it was some time before he arrived there, and when he did, he had the mortification of finding that he was eight miles from Beechwood, and six from Greenside village.

He thought, instead of going home, he had better proceed to Mrs. Leigh's, where he would be sure to find a good tea, and something substantial with it, while his mother, he knew, was only going to have a cold dinner that day, from which nothing very tempting was likely to be left.

But it was a long weary journey. Luckily the gipsies had forgotten to take away his boots; but his knickerbockers, besides being ragged and dirty, were very short, and his socks came a very little way above his ankles, and whenever he came to a house to ask his way, the dogs would fly at the calves of his legs, which, being in such an unprotected state, seemed especially to delight them, and he found himself looked upon rather suspiciously by every one he addressed, as if he were indeed the little vagabond he appeared. Of course in this world people judge by appearances, and a more

disreputable looking little creature than Ernie never had a house door slammed in his face, when he applied at it, or the house-dog bark at him as soon as he appeared. He began to get really faint and hungry, and was truly thankful at last to see, as dusk came on, the lights glimmering in the windows of Greenside.

Meanwhile Tom and his friends, feeling at last in want of their dinner, had returned to the place where they had left Ernie, but not a trace of him remained. They sought all about, but could find no signs of him. Baskets, blackberries, and dinner—all had disappeared. They shouted and shouted till the wood rang again with the sound of his name; they separated, and went each in a different direction in the hope of finding him, but the search was fruitless, and at last they gave it up.

"The little sneak," said Tom indignantly, when they had all reassembled, "I'll tell you what it is. He couldn't resist the temptation of eating the best part of our dinners, and then was afraid of being found out; so he's walked off, blackberries and all—and I dare say has taken them home to his mother, and made her believe they're all his own gathering. I shouldn't wonder but what she's got them all on the fire at the present

moment, simmering away into jam, and that fellow'll find some snug corner at home to make a private store of the rest of our provisions. Well, only wait till to-morrow, and I'll make Master Ernie pay for the blackberries."

"Let's go to his mother at once, and tell her," said Neddy Blake.

"No; I shouldn't like to do that," said Tom. "I don't want to hurt her feelings, but I won't spare him when I catch him. But you'll see, he'll be too ill to come to school to-morrow; and he'll make his mother believe it's the hard work he's had blackberrying that's done it. Never mind, my dear boy—thrashings, like other good things, are none the worse for keeping."

"Well, but I say, Tom, what are we to do for dinner?" said George Drew; "hadn't we better go back to your grandmother's, and ask her for some?"

Tom considered. The blackberry baskets were not yet full, and he wished to take all he could to Mrs. Leigh; at the same time, his schoolfellows were hungry, and he was in a manner their host.

At this moment he saw a baker's cart going down the lane, and ran and stopped it. Presently he returned with some famous new crusty loaves. "Come along," he said, "there's worse things

after all than blackberries and new bread. We'll sit down and rest, and then when we've filled our baskets, get back to my grandmother's, and ask Susan to let us have some ham and eggs for tea. I wonder what she'll say to her delicate little darling when she hears of this pretty trick. She's taken a wonderful fancy to him, but I should think this is enough to open her eyes."

The bread was very good—so were the boys' appetites. They made a hearty meal, and enjoyed it thoroughly; then they set to work again, and, having filled every bag and basket they could find, returned to Greenside, to take tea at Mrs. Leigh's.

They passed Mr. Elton's on their way there. "Let's stop in front," said George Drew, "and give three groans for Ernie Elton, who stole our dinners;" but Tom decidedly refused to allow this. "It'll do him no good," he said, "and only vex his father and mother for nothing. No, no, I think you may leave him to me; I'll settle accounts with him before the week's out."

They soon reached Mrs. Leigh's, and found everything ready for them—a nice little wood fire in the parlour grate—for the evening was chilly—and a famous tea with fancy bread, cake, and jams, and what to the hungry lads looked plea-

santest of all, a fine tongue and a capital Bath chap on the table. But with all this, as soon as Mrs. Leigh and Susan (who was in attendance to help her mistress cater for so many hungry boys) heard that they had been cheated of their dinners, they insisted that something more substantial should be prepared, and Susan, with her little assistant, set to work at once, as Tom had expected they would; and a famous dish of ham and eggs was soon placed upon the table, to which they all did ample justice.

The lamp was lit, and the bright wood fire threw out a cheerful glow, but the shutters of the parlour were not yet closed, for it was not dark when the boys came in, and in the bustle of their arrival and the unexpected cooking, Susan had overlooked the shutting up. So it was a bright pleasant picture enough that could be seen by any one that came by the house; and so one poor little wayfarer seemed to think as he drew near, and opening the garden gate, came up the foot-path and peeped in at the window. "Good gracious!" said Susan, "look at that impudent little beggar boy a looking in. I'll go and send him about his business; he means no good, I know, prowling about at this time of night."

Her mistress glanced at the window. "Poor

child! he hasn't clothes enough to cover him. Don't be cross with him, Susan; I dare say he only wants some supper, and is afraid to come to the door and ask for it."

"Ah! let's give him some," said Tom. "Poor little wretch—it's hard to be cold and hungry."

There was a feeble tap at the door, and Susan opened it. "What do you want, little boy?—we don't encourage beggars, especially after darkness. Now, don't begin to cry, for it's of no use. Here, Martha, bring this child a slice of bread and cheese, and there's twopence for your night's lodging, and come again in the morning, and I'll see if I can find a pair of old stockings for those poor little legs of yours. Now go away, that's a good boy; you won't get anything more by staying."

"Ow—ow—ow," burst forth Ernie in well-known tones on the ears of Susan and the party assembled in the parlour, "don't you know me, Mrs. Dawson? Oh, let me in, for I'm half famished and tired to death. I've been robbed and stripped of my clothes, and nearly murdered, and dreadfully ill used by a pack of good-for-nothing gipsies, because I wouldn't let them eat up the dinner Tom left in my charge. Oh, please let me in, before I drop down on the door step."

Tom and his companions, who had heard this

address, stared in blank astonishment at each other; they began to feel rather ashamed of having judged Ernie so hastily and so harshly, and to look upon him as something of a hero and a martyr. But it was impossible for them to keep from laughing when he made his appearance in the parlour. Mrs. Leigh started back in affright. "Goodness gracious! is this Ernie Elton? Oh, my dear child, do go and get washed, and take those horrid things off; and then come and have some tea."

Ernie looked at his schoolfellows.—"Oh! what I have gone through to-day! Oh, Tom, Tom, why did you leave me in charge of that dinner?—those horrid gipsies ate it all up before my very eyes, and never gave me a bit; they carried me off a dozen miles at least, and I've had to walk back all the way. You seem to have had a good tea; how did you get on for dinner? I've never tasted a morsel since the morning."

"Poor soul!—poor little dear!" said Susan, compassionately, "come in the kitchen, and let's get off those filthy rags and burn them, or they'll be giving us all sorts of horrid fevers; and then you shall have as good a tea as ever you had in your life."

She took him away, but there was a trifling

difficulty to be got over. Tom's wardrobe, of course, was kept at his father's, as, though he dined with his grandmother, and occasionally slept there, as he was to do to-night, the other was his regular home—so Ernie could not borrow of him, as he had done on previous occasions; but Martha soon settled the difficulty, and Ernie made his appearance at the tea table in one of her best dresses, which, being rather too long, he was obliged to hold up as he walked; but, as Tom said, he didn't make a bad-looking girl, only his appetite was rather hearty for a young lady.

Susan took up the garments he had thrown off, with a pair of tongs, and placed them on the top of the kitchen fire, patting them down with the poker, and they were very soon consumed; and Tom good-naturedly ran off to Mrs. Elton and informed her of Ernie's misadventure, and brought back some fresh garments for him to walk home in, which he did after a tea that satisfied even Mrs. Leigh the gipsies had not done him any material injury.



Ernie comes to the tea-table in Martha's dress. P. 92.

PART II.

CHAPTER VI.

CONCERNING ERNIE'S VISIT TO ELM TREE HOUSE, THE
• CHRISTMAS HE SPENT THERE, AND SOME OF THE
PEOPLE HE MET WITH.



AS the days grew shorter, and the pleasant fireside evenings lengthened, the boys began to talk of the coming Christmas-time, and how best to enjoy it. Ernie, you may be sure, was always glad when that season so full of good eating drew near; for his mother was too thorough a housewife not to have everything that was suitable for the occasion. But this time he anticipated better cheer than ever; for Ellie and he had received an invitation to spend a fortnight or so at the house of a very old friend of their father's, a Mr. Grey, who resided about twelve miles from London, and whose wife and himself were always glad to gather as many young folks as their house would hold around them at Christmas-time. Tom Brooke had also been asked, for

Percival and Bernard, Mr. Grey's eldest sons, had made his acquaintance when they spent their Easter holidays one year at Mr. Elton's, and they had all three become very good friends, and Tom had promised to come and pay them a visit whenever his father and mother would allow them. They had consented to do so this Christmas, and he and Ernie were to go to Mr. Grey's, along with Ellie and her father, who intended to spend the day there, and return in the evening.

All this was settled some time beforehand, and Ernie, as the time drew near, began to count the days that intervened between him and the good things he hoped to find at Elm Tree House; to say nothing of the pleasant prospect that, as a visitor, he expected to be allowed to remain in bed as long as he liked, and lounge about between meals wherever he pleased.

Bernie Grey wrote occasionally to him, but Ellie always had to reply, though Bernie's letters were very interesting, as they were full of accounts of the fattening the Christmas pig, the curing the Christmas bacon, and sundry other matters of the kind, in all of which Master Bernie was much more at home than with his book.

However, the time, though long in coming, came at last, and they all arrived safely at Elm

Tree House, in time for that pleasantest of meals, a dinner-tea. There was a famous fire in the dining room, and a table spread with pork-pies, ham, rolled beef, jams and cakes, and as soon as they were all seated round it, the housemaid brought in a plate of hot toast, and another of tea-cakes. Mr. and Mrs. Grey, their daughter, the boys, and several visitors, were all assembled there to meet them, and Ernie began to feel very comfortable when he saw a cup of steaming coffee, and a plateful of cold meat, enough for a ploughman's dinner, before him. "I think I shall do here," he said to himself, as he surveyed the table. "Mrs. Grey seems to have a notion how things should be managed; and Mr. Grey knows how to carve."

The dining room at Elm Tree House was a pleasant large room, though low in the ceiling, with a recess at the end opposite the fireplace, holding the sofa. The curtains were now drawn, but in the daytime the great bay window looked pleasantly enough over the lawns and flower garden. On either side of the recess was a door; one opened into a roomy china closet, where Mrs. Grey kept not merely her best cups and saucers, but her stores of preserves and sugar; and the other, into a snug little room, fitted up with book-

shelves and writing table, where Percie learned his lessons, and Ethel Grey kept her drawing materials, and so was called the school-room.

Of course, it being Christmas time, the room was decorated with holly; wherever holly could be put, there holly was—a great wreath over the recess that held the sofa, others round the pictures and chandelier, and Ethel Grey had holly-sprays in the thick plaits of her fair hair, and the marble vases on the mantel-piece, and an old-fashioned china punch-bowl on the table, held holly instead of flowers,—not merely the plain dark-leaved kind Londoners have to be content with, but holly with silver tips and golden to its leaves, holly with double rows of prickles, and holly with foliage as smooth and sheeny as a myrtle's; for the glory and pride of Elm Tree House was its fine old hollies and splendid evergreens.

The fire, which was built up of logs, flashed pleasantly upon the bright leaves and the gilded picture frames; the rich deep green of the flock paper, and damask curtains; on the solid dark mahogany furniture; and, above all, on the pleasant smiling faces at the table. "I shall manage to make myself at home here," thought Ernie.

Having had two or three good platefuls of the

more solid viands on the table, he went on more leisurely with the lighter articles; plum cake, seed cake, jams, and marmalade, were all leisurely discussed. Then he looked around him, to see what sort of people he had come amongst, and was tolerably satisfied with the survey. Mr. and Mrs. Grey and their family he was acquainted with already; but there were Tracy Randall, Mr. and Mrs. Sidney, old friends of the house, their son and daughter, Lilian, Mrs. Grey's niece, and Miss Crew, the governess, all pleasant looking enough; but Ernie knew the grown up people would not be so likely to affect his comfort in the house (if only the mistress of it understood her duties as a liberal provider) as the junior branches, whom he now began to regard more intently.

They seemed likely young people enough; "only too noisy, I'm afraid," thought Ernie. "I do like a quiet life, though I never seem to get it. I think that stout boy over there seems something of my turn of mind." The young gentleman thus designated was a nephew of Mrs. Grey's, and brother to Lilian Saville; he certainly was stout, and his clothes, however new, always had the appearance of being too tight for him. He had round black eyes, sleek, straight, dark hair, and full ruddy cheeks. He was about a year

younger than Ernie, and a boy of a peculiarly solid steady turn of mind. The amount of mischief he got through in his holidays was something surprising. It certainly showed what could be done with a little perseverance in that way; and the best of it was, that being so very grave and sober in his appearance, one was a long time believing his capacities in that direction. It was a considerable time even before his aunt fully appreciated his peculiar talents. Percie, she knew, in his younger days had been, and Bernie was, a sad pickle; but Ned Saville—one would as soon have thought of a tortoise rivalling the freaks of a monkey, as Ned emulating his cousins in mischief. But the last midsummer holidays had taught her a better estimate of her nephew's powers. He was at Elm Tree House for a fortnight, and at the end of that time Mrs. Grey ordered the housemaid to pack up Master Saville's things, and drove him up herself to his father's in Finsbury Square.

"Ned's eclipsed himself this midsummer," she said, as she sat down to lunch.

"In what way?" said her brother.

"Mischief," said Mrs. Grey; "I always did think that no mortal boy could surpass my own in that line, but they never equalled Ned. On

Monday he fell into the deep pond in the garden, because he went angling for tittlebats, though expressly forbidden to go near it. The next day I saw Bernie and him on the top of the south wall ; they came down as soon as they perceived me, Bernie scrambling over a peach tree and knocking down the unripe fruit, while Ned jumped down into a cucumber frame, cut his legs terribly, and smashed every pane of glass in it. On Wednesday he chased the horses in the paddock, throwing stones to make them run the faster, was kicked over by Peggy and very much bruised. On Thursday I found him with little Jamie stuffing physic bottles full of frogs. On Friday he took to archery, which is all very well in its way, but it is not desirable to have the house windows made to serve as targets. On Saturday, when Chambers went to bed, she found the stable cat, who has recently kittened, very comfortably installed with her small family in the box where she keeps her best bonnet ; and on turning down the bedclothes she discovered a lively collection of snails and slugs. Ryder had seen Ned very busy collecting them in the afternoon, and had commended his industry. On Sunday he stole cherries while other folks were busy preparing for chapel : so, altogether, as I don't wish

him to be drowned, or killed by a kick from our horses or a fall from our walls, I've thought it better to bring him back this time, and hope it will teach him at Christmas that moderation is desirable even in mischief."

So, these holidays, Ned had made sundry promises of amendment to his father, and made his appearance at Elm Tree House as a reformed character, but had not been there long enough to have his sincerity tested.

All tea time he had steadily regarded Ernie, whenever his eyes were off his own plate; and when they left the dining-room with Miss Crewe, and proceeded to what in former times was the nursery, and was now known as the playroom, he came up to him, and blandly said—

"Hope you enjoyed your tea—you seemed to do so."

"Yes, I did," said Ernie; "Mrs. Grey's spiced beef is excellent, and the pork pies are——"

"Stunners, I consider," said Ned; "so are my aunt's black puddings."

"Oh, Mrs. Grey is your aunt, is she? Then you know the ways of the house. I've never been here before."

"It's not a bad place to come to," said Ned, reflectively, "only the worst of it is, my aunt's

strict—terribly strict. You must be down to breakfast at eight precisely; no excuse about oversleeping one's self will do with her. And you're sharply looked after as to what part of the house you go to. Don't that Chambers give it you if she catches you in the kitchen;—you can't even put your nose in to ask what there is for dinner; and then one must go to bed at a certain time, and ain't allowed to sit up to supper, which is rather trying, as in my room I can hear all the clatter of the knives and forks, and if there's anything hot smell it quite plainly."

"No suppers," said Ernie; "no suppers," he repeated, in the tone of a martyr.

"Not a bit," said Ned, "for us young ones. Marched off at half-past eight, and supper goes in at nine. I don't say but what one's allowed to tuck in as much as one pleases at tea, and there's always lots of jams and cakes, rice-milk, and fancy bread, just as you saw to-night. But you know a fellow can't eat enough at one meal for two—it isn't likely."

"No, it can't be done," said Ernie, gravely (I think if you had seen Ernie at tea that night you would have said it could); "and it's rather unreasonable to be expected down at that hour of the morning."

Ethel Grey, Lilian Saville, and Bessy Sydney now came up to help Miss Crewe keep her young folks amused. They set them to play at forfeits, blind-man's-buff, and hunt the slipper. Presently Tracy Randall, Percie, and Tom Brooke joined them, and were allowed to remain on promising good behaviour. Ernie declined to join in any of the games, saying he was tired, and Ned stopped out, as he said, to keep Ernie company.

The fun grew fast and noisy ; but at last the housemaid came up with a mild intimation on the part of Mrs. Grey, that, as the drawing-room ceiling seemed likely to come through, perhaps they would not mind sitting down to a round game of cards. They went into the drawing-room for the purpose, but Miss Crewe kept back the very little ones, as it was time for them to be put to bed ; and after an hour at Pope Joan, Ernie and the rest of the younger portion of the visitors said good night and went to bed also.

Ernie found he was to sleep in a double-bedded room on the first floor. He had one small bed to himself, and Ned and Bernie shared the other. As Ned said, it was trying (particularly as they chose to leave the door open) to hear the clatter of plates and knives from the dining-room ; and

presently, when the smell of some good hot soup ascended the stairs, Ernie groaned as he saw no chance of partaking of it. To make it still more aggravating, Mr. Grey liked to have his pastry hot, and the smell of apple and mince pies was truly tantalizing.

"Bernie," he said, "don't your mother ever give us boys any supper?"

"No," said Bernie, "excepting birthdays and Christmas Eve: then we have some."

"Oh, dear; I feel quite sinking. It's a long time since tea, and I was too tired with my journey to eat much then. Besides, of course I thought, being a visitor, I should sit up to supper, and not be sent off like a baby without any. Isn't there any chance of getting something to eat?"

"No," said Bernie; "I don't see that there is."

"Where's the larder?"

"Oh, you mustn't go there! If Chambers catches you, look out," said Ned; "she found me there once, and I thought I should never hear the last of it."

"Well, I suppose I must put up with it for to-night," said Ernie, with an air of resignation; "but I shall see what can be done to-morrow. I

don't wish to hurt your mother's feelings, Bernie, but I must manage to let her know that when I pay people a visit, I expect to be made comfortable."

Bernie was soon fast asleep. He was like his cousin Ned, rather stout—a round, roly-poly, pleasant-looking little fellow with fair wavy hair, and an open, merry face—rather babyish in some things for his years, and easily led away into anything that promised mischief. He was to go to school in the spring, but for the last year had been, with his little brothers, placed under the charge of Miss Crewe, and very hard work that young lady found it to instil anything into their youthful minds. This was especially the case with Bernie, as he was much more at home in the farm yard or the garden than with his books, and the little ones had an uncommon knack of forgetting their letters as fast as they learned them.

Miss Crewe had made a favourable impression on Ernie, as she had been very attentive to him at the tea table; and she, like every one else when first acquainted with him, thought him a nice, quiet, interesting little boy, for, although thirteen, he looked very little older than Bernie.

Ned and Ernie kept awake some time, grumbling at intervals; and once the former got out of

bed, ran on the landing, and peeped over the balluster.

"What's going on?" said Ernie — "clearing away?"

"Yes; haven't they been tucking in. Nearly all the pies are gone, and as to the jam tarts, I don't see one left."

"Jam tarts!" said Ernie, "and not a taste for me. Well, I'm quite exhausted, so I think we had better say good night."

They were soon as fast asleep as Bernie; and in the morning, after being called two or three times, managed to get down by a quarter to nine. In fact, I don't think they would have risen before ten, if Bernie had not amused himself in the intervals of dressing by throwing the boots of all the three at his companions' noses, which made Ned so indignant that he promised Bernie a thrashing, and proceeded to keep his word, and there was a little encounter in the bed-room, in which Bernie having proved victorious, he walked down and ate his breakfast with the air of a boy who has made a good beginning to the day's work.

Ernie thought it very unkind of Mrs. Grey not to have kept the coffee hot for him: neither did she offer to have fresh made. "I don't think quite

so well of her as I did at first," he said to himself; "I shall try in the course of the day, if I can't make acquaintance with the cook. I wonder if she's at all like Susan Dawson; she's a pleasant person, and I can always get on very well with her."

After breakfast, Ned, Bernard and Ernie, strolled about the house and gardens. It was really a famous place for young people to spend their Christmas holidays in. There was a great rocking horse in the hall; plenty of pleasant story-books in the little schoolroom; and a swing in the garden, just like Mrs. Leigh's. But Ernie did not feel attracted towards that, as you may imagine. He found out where the larder was, but, being caught peeping in by Chambers the cook, was reprov'd in a very decided tone, that did not at all prepossess him in her favour. "Not a bit like Mrs. Dawson!" he said to himself—"don't think I shall get on with her at all!"

However, he contrived to invent an errand into the kitchen, and approved of its appearance. There were sides of bacon hanging up, as well as hams, great dried marrows and ropes of onions; and plenty of bright dish-covers, jelly moulds, &c. Altogether, though not so large as Farmer Brooke's, it was a pleasant promising looking kitchen. Then

Ned, with a mysterious nod, told him he should see something worth looking at, and led him through the long stone passages to where a fine young porker that had been killed the day before hung suspended by its hind legs.

"Nice, isn't it?" said Ned, surveying the pig critically with his hands in his pockets.

"Ye—es; it'll do," replied Ernie; "feed it yourself, Bernard?"

"Gardener and I did," replied Bernie; "I've helped. I know how to mix pig's food as well as he does—all toppings and barley meal. Just feel him—isn't he firm?"

"Pretty well," replied Ernie; "but how long is he to hang here? When are they going to cut him up?"

"This morning," said Bernie; "the butcher's expected every minute. We're going to have some for dinner; pig's fry, roast loin—Chambers always tells me what there is to be—curry and boiled mutton."

"Pudding?" said Ernie.

"*And* pie," answered Ned, with an emphatic nod; "you may trust my aunt for that sort of thing. But, I say, won't this fellow eat jolly?"

"I should say so, when I've fed him," cried Bernie: "but, come along; let's go out in the

grounds. They're all there, shying at Aunt Sally."

Ernie slowly followed Ned and Bernie. *Their* minds dwelt only on the coming roast at dinner. *His*, more expansive in its grasp, saw in that porker visions of supper and of savoury chops. Pork chops!—and off that pig! If it could only be brought about! Slowly he strolled round the grounds, with his hands in their usual places, while the other young people played at Aunt Sally, or chased each other on the broad gravel paths. It was a lovely day—a little gem of sunlight stolen from summer — and the children enjoyed it thoroughly.

After a while Ernie sauntered into the dining-room, where he found a blazing fire, and the day's newspaper, of which he took possession, as well as of Mr. Grey's own especial easy-chair, and passed the time pleasantly enough for an hour, reading the murders and police reports. Then he fell off into a nice little doze, which lasted till the housemaid came to lay the cloth for dinner.

The pork was excellent ; and Ernie did it ample justice. The pies and puddings also gave him satisfaction ; in fact, he felt convinced that if Mrs. Grey could only be persuaded to modify her ideas respecting supper, and give orders that hot coffee

should be ready at any hour of the morning he chose to come down, he might spend a fortnight pleasantly enough at Elm Tree House.

Mr. Elton took his departure soon after dinner, and the rest of the day passed much as the preceding one had done, and they all went to bed about the same time.

But not to sleep: at least Ned, Bernard and Ernie did not, for the latter having cautiously closed the door, began opening his mind to his companions.

"Bernard, that roast pork of yours did you credit, at dinner."

"Yes, I thought it was the thing, myself," said Bernard; "our pigs always are."

"Do you two like pork chops?" continued Ernie.

"Oh, don't I?" said Master Ned, smacking his lips at the idea.

"They're jolly!" said Bernie, who would do as his brother Percie had done before him, and deal in slang, in spite of his mother's lectures and Miss Crewe's reproofs.

"They are," said Ernie, "especially for supper."

"Supper! oh, it's no good our thinking of that," said Ned; "there's no chance of our having supper."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Ernie, and after binding his companions to secrecy, he proceeded to inform them of the plans he had formed about the pig. Ned approved of them, but the boldness of Ernie's ideas rather appalled him. Bernard was delighted with the project, and rolled over and over in bed with ecstasy, much to Ned's annoyance. However, they were soon all united in the resolve to make a bold stroke for a supper; and only waited till the household were asleep to do so.

When Ernie thought the right time had come, he told the others to dress, and did so himself. Then they crept on tip-toe down stairs, and proceeded in the darkness, groping their way as best they could to the kitchen. Here, Ernie, who had secured some matches, struck a light, turned the gas on in the burner, and then the three lads set to work.

The first thing was to find the pork, which hung in the larder; having done so by the help of a bit of lighted wood, which served as a candle in default of better, Ernie gave it to Ned to carry into the kitchen, and then told Bernie to light the fire, which he very soon did, as in many things he was a handy little fellow.

"Now," said Ernie, "do you, Ned, cut off four

nice chops, not too thick,—I'm weak in the wrist, or I'd do it myself; and while the fire's burning, let's look for the frying-pan. I think that's it, Bernie, just bring it here."

In the bustle caused by so many visitors, the frying-pan had been put away without being cleaned. "Dirty creatures!" said Ernie, surveying it. "I don't think much of your cook, I can tell you, Bernard. Here, Ned, now you've cut the chops, you'd better clean it, and do you, Bernie, look for the knives and forks."

Ned cleaned the frying-pan after a fashion of his own, by pouring some cold water into it, and wiping it dry on the clean round towel, then, under Ernie's directions, cooked the chops, while Bernie laid the cloth, and put the plates to warm.

"Take them up now," said Ernie, "I think they're done. I'll carve—one for you, Bernie, one for you, Ned, and I'll have the two little ones left. But where's the mustard?"

"Oh, never mind that," said Bernie, "they'll do very well without."

"Pork without mustard! It's bad enough to eat it without apple sauce. No, I think after I've taken all the trouble of getting you two fellows such a capital supper, the least you can do is to find the mustard. Where's it kept, Bernie?"

"In the cruet-stand in the dining room. But I'm not going alone to fetch it, I know."

"Ned'll go with you, for mustard we must have. I'd go myself, only I'm not so well used to the house as you two."

The two boys went; but their movements in the kitchen had aroused Mrs. Grey. She sat up in bed to listen. Percie, too, who was in the front of the house, occupying the room next his mother's, heard something going on, and woke Tom Brooke, who slept with him. The two boys partly dressed themselves, and creeping through the study, which was between their room and the landing, bent over the stairs. They heard footsteps; nay, more, they saw a glimmering light—the piece of lighted wood Bernie carried—but the draught from the hall extinguished it as he approached the dining-room, and Ned's foot slipping he fell down near the foot of the stairs. "All right," thought Percie, "I'll settle the thieves," and he stole back into the study, took two of the chairs from it, and hurled them over the ballusters into the hall. They came full upon poor Ned, who was just recovering himself from his fall, and gave him the blackest eye he ever had, and the back of one of the chairs striking Bernie on the nose, set it bleeding wofully.

Ernie heard the noise, and came forward to see what was amiss, but in the dark struck his head against an open door in the passage, and gave himself a terrible bruise. Mrs. Grey opened her door, hearing the noise, and called to know what was the matter. No one answered. "Perhaps I've killed them," thought Percie, "so I'll say nothing about it till the morning. I suppose it's only justifiable homicide if one smashes a fellow for breaking into one's house; but at any rate I'll go back to bed now." Tom and he crept softly back through the study and into their room, where they lay speculating for some time upon the probable results of Percie's exploits.

Mrs. Grey was now terribly alarmed, she made up her mind that thieves were breaking into the house, and even Mr. Grey, though a very heavy sleeper, was roused by the noise. He jumped out of bed, partly dressed himself, struck a light, and in spite of his wife's entreaties that he would remain where he was, and let the thieves help themselves, took the poker in his hand, and went down stairs. The boys, who were now in the dining-room, groping for the mustard, heard him, and crept softly into the little school-room that opened out of it. He did not go in there, but looked in the dining-room as he passed, and

examined the fastenings, then muttering "More likely to be trying the back of the house," turned away towards the kitchen. He tried the shutters and fastenings in the passages and the side doors as he went there, but all was secure; so were those in the kitchen itself. He was very much puzzled. He looked about him when he had arrived at the latter apartment, and the sight of the kitchen table, off which the cat and two of her offspring sprung as he entered, and the smouldering embers of the fire, struck him. It was clear some one had recently been preparing a meal there. "Queer, queer," thought Mr. Grey, as he looked about him, "I suppose the truth of the matter is, that Ann's been helping herself to a supper off pork chops. Hang the girl! bread and cheese isn't good enough for her. It must have been her groping about in the dark that made this disturbance. She's walked herself off, now, it seems, and left the gas burning." He turned it out, went away, and informed Mrs. Grey when he returned to his room of what he had seen.

Ann, Chambers's help in the kitchen, was a girl who was continually getting into trouble, through an unfortunate propensity, like Ernie, to eat whatever came in her way at all times and seasons; she had been often threatened with dis-

missal on that account, as Mr. Grey very well knew, and he now intimated to his wife that he thought the sooner the threats were carried out the better. Mrs. Grey merely observed that she would inquire about it in the morning; but though she did not tell her husband so, was by no means convinced in her own mind that it was Ann who had broken their rest. She remembered Master Ned's pranks the preceding summer, and though none had been so audacious as this appeared to be, still, as she said to herself, "he's had six months at home to improve in, and there's no knowing what he may be equal to now. If Ann had wanted pork chops for supper she would have gone to work another way to get them."

The three boys remained in the school-room till they thought Mr. Grey had had sufficient time to settle comfortably into bed again; then they crept through the dining-room without troubling themselves farther about the mustard, stole back into the kitchen, and sat down shivering and cold to the chops, or rather what remained of them, for the cat and her kittens had been helping themselves, and appeared to have taken an especial fancy to Ernie's share. He wanted them to cook more, but the fire was low, the coal-scuttle empty, and both Ned and Bernie positively

refused to go to the cellar for a fresh supply. They ate two or three morsels in fear and trembling, listening lest any one should come down to disturb them. But as no one did, they crept back to bed at last, and slept on till late in the morning, when they woke with bad headaches and bruised faces.

They slunk down to breakfast, hoping that as they were late every one else would have finished and gone away ; but Mrs. Grey had been behind time in making her own appearance, as Chambers had informed her as soon as she came down stairs, that she would be glad if she would come and see the loin of pork, which some one, she was sure, had been cutting chops off. Besides, she had found it in the kitchen, and was certain she had left it in the larder over night.

Mrs. Grey looked at the pork, and it certainly was not as the butcher had left it. The whole state of the kitchen, and especially of the jack-towel, showed that some one had been busy in the night ; but neither Chambers nor her mistress thought Ann was the guilty party. " She'd know better than to haggle the meat like that," said Chambers ; adding, " It's my opinion, ma'am, that that quiet young gentleman that came last and Master Ned are at the bottom of this."

"Well, we must try to ascertain ; but now let us have the coffee in, for breakfast is late," said her mistress, and left the kitchen.

When the three boys entered the dining-room Mrs. Grey looked curiously at them ; so did Tom and Percie, who had both heard of the state of the pork and Chambers's suspicions.

"How came you with that black eye, Ned?" said Percie.

"Oh, something or other knocked against it, I suppose," replied Ned, sheepishly.

"Whatever is the matter with your nose, Bernie?" inquired his mother. "It's swelled to twice the natural size."

Bernie took out his handkerchief and rubbed the feature alluded to, as if to ascertain what ailed it, but said nothing.

Tom fixed his eyes upon the bruise on Ernie's forehead, then said, "You don't get on with your breakfast, Ernie. How did you enjoy your pork chops last night at supper?"

"That stupid Ned burned them, and the cat and her kittens walked away with three; Ned and Bernie would have the other, so there wasn't a taste left for me," said Ernie, forgetting the necessity for caution in the sense of his wrongs.

Percie sprang from his chair with delight.

"It's all serene! We know all about the thieves that stole the pork now. I hope you enjoyed your supper, and your dessert too. I say Ned, I should say the chair that fell on you had a soft fall, eh, my boy?"

"We must inquire into this after breakfast," said Mr. Grey, and accordingly the three delinquents were examined in the study, and the end of it was that they were let off with a very severe reprimand, as Mr. Grey hardly liked to punish other people's boys, and Mrs. Grey said as that was the case it wouldn't be fair to chastise his own. But when dinner time came, to Ernie's horror, three basins of water gruel were brought in and placed before himself, Ned, and Bernie, Mrs. Grey gravely informing them that after their supper, which must have disagreed with them, and the unpleasant accidents they had encountered through being taken for thieves, she considered low diet and keeping quiet for a day at least were absolutely necessary, and Chambers, who was as good a sick nurse as she was a cook, being of the same opinion, had kindly made this gruel expressly for them.

Bernie and Ned took theirs after a little demur, but Ernie, looking round at the roast beef at top of the table, and the savoury, richly brown pork

chops (so differently cooked from Ned's) at the bottom, fairly burst into tears, calling out, "I never, never touched the chops last night. That horrid cat and her kittens ate every bit but what Ned and Bernie tucked in."

However, there was nothing but water gruel for him; and at tea, instead of jams and cake, each boy had a basin of plain bread and milk, and they were sent off early to bed, Chambers herself paying them one or two domiciliary visits to see that they were not getting into fresh mischief.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW ERNIE ASKED FOR A RIDE, AND GOT A BATH INTO
THE BARGAIN.



THE next morning was bright and sunry, but cold; in fact, it had been freezing hard for the last four-and-twenty hour, and some of the young people thought it would be a good opportunity to skate and slide on the reservoir, a large piece of water, about a mile and a half from Elm Tree House, and which just then being very shallow, was a capital place for the purpose, as, if the ice proved too thin in any part to bear the skates, nothing much worse could happen than a little wetting.

Ernie did not wish to go. Mr. Grey's easy-chair and the dining room fire were both so thoroughly to his taste, that he had no wish to leave them, so he said he would rather remain at home, as there was nothing suited him so well as quiet; but Mrs. Grey told him it wouldn't do for



Ernie prefers Mrs. Grey's easy chair.

a boy to have stay-at-home habits, and a good bracing walk on a clear frosty day was much better than lounging about in the house ; so, much against his will, he had to go. Tom, Percie, Bernie, and Ned were of the party, and Miss Crewe, being of opinion that if the little ones were well wrapped up, it would amuse them to look at the skaters, took them along with Ellie and Bessy Sydney to look on.

The reservoir was quite a lively scene. Several gentlemen were having a game at hockey, and a number of people were standing about on the borders looking at them. One man had brought two or three chairs, apparently for the accommodation of any one who might be in want of a rest. Ernie thought this very considerate, and sank down on one with an air of utter exhaustion. "Tired, young master?" said the man to whom the chairs belonged.

"Very," replied Ernie ; "I've walked all the way from Elm Tree House, and I feel quite done up."

Percie and Tom began to skate, and Bernie and Ned to slide. The young ladies and the little ones looked on, and walked about to keep themselves warm ; and the owner of the chairs came up to Ernie, and said, "Like a ride on the ice, sir?"

"No objection at all," said Ernie; "in fact I think it'll be a much more sensible thing than skating or sliding either. Only look at those fellows! if they ain't getting quite warm! Working like that, and calling it pleasure!"

The man gently tilted the chair on which Ernie sat, so that the front legs were in the air, and pushed it along the ice on its hind ones. It made a very good sort of a sleigh used in that fashion, and Ernie found it very pleasant indeed. He had an excellent view of the reservoir, which was really very pretty, with a great many trees growing about the banks and hedges, which, joined to its irregular shape, made it look more like a small lake than an artificial piece of water. He had a capital ride; and when the man thought he had had enough, he brought him back to the place he started from. Ernie still kept his seat, and said, "Thank you; that was a very nice ride; I've quite enjoyed it."

The man touched his cap, and held out his hand. Ernie took no notice: at last the other spoke out, "A trifle for the use of the chair, sir."

"Use of the chair! It's none the worse for my use. What harm have I done that I should pay for it?"

The man looked rather surprised at this view of

the matter, and said in a sort of surly-civil tone, "Well, something, sir, at any rate for the ride you've had."

Ernie fumbled in his pockets, but what pocket money he had brought with him had been left in his little trunk. He would have given the man some if he had had it, but as he could not, he got cross and said, "I didn't ask you to give it me; and you needn't have done so, unless you liked; so I don't see that I'm bound to give you anything."

"Oh, well, we're not of the same mind, it seems," said the man; he paused a moment, then said, "As you've enjoyed that ride so much, perhaps you'd like another?"

"Don't mind at all," said Ernie.

"Come along then," replied the other, and propelled the chair in the same fashion as before for a little time; then approached a part from which everyone else kept aloof, and sent the chair forward with an impetus as he left his hold of it that carried it on to where the ice, as he well knew, was as thin as glass. Then he ran back to the bank to enjoy Ernie's situation at his leisure.

Of all the howls that ever boy set up, I think none could equal Ernie's when he became aware of his situation. Crack—crack went the ice under

him. Down—down sank the chair. He imagined himself in danger of drowning; for the water being rather thick, and a layer of ice underneath, it was not so easy to see the bottom, as in other parts. “Tom, Tom!” he shouted. “Ow—ow—ow—Tom, Tom, come and help me. If you’ll only save me this once, I’ll forgive you all the unkind tricks you’ve ever played me.”

“What’s the matter, Ernie?” said Tom, who, with Percie and the other boys, had now joined Miss Crewe, and was standing on the bank—“if you don’t like sitting there, get up and come here.”

“I can’t—the ice won’t bear me. I’m sinking—oh, Tom, Tom! I shall be drowned! and you’ll all be hanged for murder. I can’t swim, and you know it—and you can, and won’t help me. Oh! the water’s over my feet—I’m going, going!—oh, what will become of me!”

At that instant down the chair went through the ice and water till it reached a firm footing; then Ernie began to see there was less danger of drowning than he thought for, as the water was not up to his knees after all. But it was terribly cold; and how to escape from his present position was the point. At every step he took, the ice gave way, and two or three times he nearly fell

foremost. Miss Crewe and Bessy begged Tom and Percie to go to his assistance, but they both politely informed the young ladies that they preferred dry clothes to wet ones ; and, as Ernie was in no danger of anything but a ducking, they thought he might very well find his way out by himself. Tom Brooke turned to the owner of the chairs, and asked him how Ernie came there. The man told him civilly enough of the young gentleman's unhandsome conduct, upon which Tom put his hand in his pocket, and gave him a shilling, saying—

“ Ah, it's a little peculiarity of his never to pay ready money if he can help it.” The other then volunteered to go to Ernie's assistance. “ No, no,” said Tom ; “ I'm glad you've taught him a lesson, and hope he'll profit by it. So let him get out as he can—it may teach him better another time.”

Ernie was slowly getting nearer ; as he was now where the ice gave him a firm footing, he got on pretty well. But he presented a deplorable appearance, with his wet trousers clinging to and chilling his legs, and his great-coat splashed with mud. Ned and Bernie stood on the bank, rejoicing after their own fashion, with their hands in their pockets, and executing something like an Indian

war-dance. The little ones crowed with delight, and even the girls were convulsed with laughter.

"Unfeeling creatures!" thought Ernie; "they're like so many savages rejoicing over a friend's misfortunes." Here, through not attending to his footing, he slipped, and the ice giving way, he was again partially immersed, and found great difficulty in extricating himself. "Oh, dear! oh, dear!" he moaned, "shall I ever get out of this? Tom, you brute, why don't you help me? Bernard, give me a hand. Is this the way you treat a fellow, when he's good enough to come twenty miles to see you? Ned, you donkey, don't stand grinning there; but come and help me out of this mess. Oh, you good-for-nothing creatures! If ever I get out alive, Ned, see if I don't smack your head! Oh, Miss Crewe, won't you help me?—I shall catch my death of cold!—I quite considered when I came out, that I was under your protection. What will Mrs. Grey say to you for not taking better care of me?"

Miss Crewe was so overcome by this address, that it quite brought the tears in her eyes, and she turned to Percie, saying—

"Do help him out, for I think he's had as much cold water as is good for him."

Percie cautiously advanced, and, giving Ernie

a helping hand, brought him safely to the bank, where he stood shivering, dripping, drenched, and terribly indignant.

"He really will catch cold," said Miss Crewe ; "I do wish, Percie, you'd take him home at once, and make him change all his things. He ought to be made to run all the way, or he will be thoroughly chilled."

"All right," said Percie, "Tom and I'll see to that." So they did, for they each took a hand, and never suffered Ernie to pause, even to draw breath ; but kept him on at a sharp trot, till they reached home ; when, as Mrs. Grey was out, having gone for a drive with Mr. and Mrs. Sydney, Chambers took the management of the case on herself, made Ernie put his feet in hot water, and insisted on his going to bed. When she had got him safely tucked in, she brought him up a steaming basin of water gruel, which, she informed him, was all he would get for dinner. Ernie remonstrated, but in vain ; Chambers informed him in a civil but decided tone, that she wasn't going to have any one ill in the house at Christmas time, if she could help it. There was quite enough work to do without that.

However, Ernie made up his mind that dinner he would have, and so, appeasing Chambers by

swallowing a portion of the gruel, he turned round, and doing as she bade him, fell asleep. In fact, he slept so soundly, owing to the gruel having been flavoured with a tablespoonful of rum (to counteract the effects of the cold water), and the unusual fatigue he had undergone, for he had never before ran at such a pace in his life, as he had that morning between Tom and Percie, that even the smell of the dinner, and the return of the young folks from the reservoir, failed to wake him.

Chambers informed her mistress of the measures she had adopted with regard to Ernie, and that lady having peeped in the bed-room to see how he was getting on, and finding him in a sound sleep, charged Bernie and Ned not to go in, to wake him, and, carefully closing the door, left him to enjoy his repose.

A little after three he awoke, looked about for his clothes, and not finding his trousers, which Chambers had taken down to dry, made free with Bernie's, that were in the room, and which came half way up his legs, and descended to the dining-room. Here he found the dessert on the table, and Mr. Grey and Mr. Sydney sipping their wine. Ernie looked dreamily about him, with an evidently disappointed air.

"What's the matter, my boy?" said Mr. Grey, kindly.

"Dinner all cleared away, and not a sign of tea!" groaned Ernie. "I'm very hungry; I haven't eaten a morsel since breakfast, excepting some abominable stuff called gruel, the cook brought me."

"Oh, come," said Mr. Grey, "we haven't had you here to starve you—we'll see what Chambers can do for you." He rang the bell, and told the housemaid that Master Elton would be glad of some dinner; and she was to ask Chambers to send him in some.

Ernie was not one of Chambers' favourites; so when she received the message, instead of thinking what savoury little repast she could furnish at so short a notice, as would certainly have been the case if her dear boy Percie (whom, ever since he was in short clothes, she had always conscientiously endeavoured to spoil) had been concerned, or even that roly-poly rogue Bernie, whom she used to lecture or pet by turns. She selected the most untempting dish remaining from dinner—a boiled leg of mutton—which by this time was quite cold, and desired Sarah to carry it in.

I should have liked you to have seen Ernie's face, when the tray was put before him; but

as Mr. Grey took no further notice, he was obliged to make the best meal he could upon the untempting joint, and then sulkily strolled into the garden, where from the dining-room window he had seen Ned.

"I've come here for something, I think," he said, as he approached that young gentleman. "Water gruel for dinner yesterday, and cold boiled mutton to-day. I suppose that's what people call Christmas housekeeping. I think you might have woke me, Master Ned, when the dinner was on the table."

"So I would; but aunt said you were not to be disturbed," said Ned, munching an apple as he spoke.

"I've never even had any dessert," said Ernie in a grieved tone; "Mr. Grey might have had the politeness to ask me to take some. I wonder where the fruit's kept in this house."

"Don't you know? Up in that room," said Ned, pointing to an attic window in the red-tiled roof. "It's a sight to see, I can tell you! The pears! such whoppers! hanging in rows from the ceiling, and the apples in bushels, spread upon straw. Don't I wish I could get in there and fill my pockets! Talk of suppers!—wouldn't it be jolly to have a good supply of pears and apples in

one's room, to tuck in when one went to bed? No trouble about them, you know, as there was about the chops. All ready cooked, as one may say, and fit to be eaten."

Bernie came up just then, and Ernie addressed him—

"Bernard, who keeps the key of your fruit-room?"

"Oh, Ethie, always; and puts out the fruit that's wanted every day."

"Perhaps she wouldn't object to let me have it for a few minutes," said Ernie, in an off-hand, careless tone. "Suppose you ask her."

Bernie opened his blue eyes in astonishment. "It won't be any use if I do. Go and ask her yourself."

"Oh, it's of no great consequence. But I say, Bernie, isn't there any chance of getting into that room?—I mean just to see it, you know."

"Ask Ethie to let you, the next time she goes there."

"U-um—well, when will that be?"

"To-morrow morning. I'll go and tell her you want to see it."


"Never mind now; it'll do when she's going in." They sauntered about a little longer, and then entered the house. It being Christmas Eve, they

found there was to be a supper ; and after tea, snap-dragon in the play-room, in which every one joined but Ernie, who always considered the game a very stupid one. As he said, it would have been a great deal easier just to hand the plums round in a rational manner, instead of expecting people to burn their fingers off to get them.

However, he made up at supper for his indifferent dinner ; devouring sandwiches, mince-pies and cheesecakes wholesale, and then went to bed full of plans to obtain access to the fruit-room on the following day, and to profit in some measure by doing so.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHY ERNIE AND NED COULDN'T COME DOWN TO DINNER
ON CHRISTMAS-DAY.

HE Christmas morning was very bright and sunny. After breakfast, the young folks ran in the grounds, accompanied by Miss Crewe, with the exception of Ernie, Ned, and Bernie, who went up into the play-room, to have, as the first suggested, "a quiet chat, instead of racing about like so many wild bulls."

"Let's have a cheering blaze," said Ned, poking the fire, and putting a log or two on it. "There, that's something like!—nothing like a jolly wood fire on a winter's day. I say, shan't I be glad when dinner-time comes? Seen the pudding, Ernie?"

"No; is it a big one?"

"Isn't it—that's all! And the loveliest little sucking pig you ever set eyes on!—and such a

whopping ham, with fowls to match ! game pies, and roast beef. There'll be a spread, I can tell you, at Elm Tree House to-day !"

"That's satisfactory," said Ernie, rubbing his hands with an air of gratification, "especially when one hasn't dined for two days. Still, you see, we haven't got over the difficulty about the suppers. Fasting long does *not* agree with me ; and, though fruit is not a very substantial meal, still it is better than nothing at all. The question is how to obtain a supply." He looked hard at Bernie. "Can't you suggest something, Bernard?"

"Let's save it from what we have after dinner, and eat it when we go to bed," said innocent Bernie.

"You stupid !" said Ned ; "what's the good of doing that ? A likely story, going without one's dessert ! No ; that'll never do !"

A light footstep was heard on the stairs, and the sound of a key in the lock of a door. "There's Ethie going in the fruit-room ; shall we run and ask her to let us have a look ?" said Bernie.

"Look !" cried Ernie, contemptuously ; "what's looking ?—making one's mouth water for nothing. Listen, Ned ; is she going downstairs ?"

The play-room was separated from the fruit-room by two landings, between which were two

stairs. Ernie and Ned crept on to the first, but Ethie had not gone down. She was some time selecting the finest apples and pears she could find; and placing them in a basket she had brought for that purpose. Presently, they heard Mrs. Grey's voice calling her daughter, and Ethie ran out of the room, with her basket on her arm, and having locked the door, hastened downstairs. But, running too fast, her foot slipped; and, to save herself from falling, she let go the basket, and the pears and apples rolled on the ground. Ned and Bernie ran to pick them up, so did Ernie; and having secured two fine golden pippins, he went back to the play-room, and sat down to eat them. Presently the two others came in. "Got them all up for her," said Bernie, "and she gave us each a pear for doing it. Look here!"

"And look here!" said Ned, producing from his pocket the key of the fruit-room, which Ethie had let fall when she dropped the basket, and had forgotten to look for. "Now, who says we won't have some supper to-night? Let's be quick, before she misses it!"

"Well, that's capital!" said Ernie. "Come along, Bernard, and help Ned pick out the best; then you can stow them away in the bottom of the cupboard in our room. You'd better do the run-

ning up and down, you know, while Ned sorts them, and I'll point them out to him. That's division of labour."

"*What* am I to do?" said Bernie, when they had entered the room.

"Take and stow these apples away in our room, stupid!" said Ned, filling Bernie's pockets as he spoke with some lovely little pippins.

"You ain't going to steal them, are you?" said Bernie.

"Steal them!—what stuff!" said Ned. "Only helping ourselves to a few, in case we feel faint at bed-time. Now, just take these down, and then run up for some more." Bernie hesitated; he looked at the fruit, and certainly thought it would be very pleasant to have a store at bed-time; but then, on the other hand, he rather shrank from helping himself to it. The fun of getting up in the night, and cutting chops and cooking them, when everyone else was asleep, had made him shut his eyes to the dishonesty of the act; but purloining the fruit like this, in broad daylight, seemed too commonplace an affair not to let him see more clearly its real nature.

While Bernie hesitated, with his arms and pockets full of apples, the boys heard some one approaching. It was Ethie, who, missing the

key, had run back to fetch it; and finding it where Master Ned had left it—in the outside of the lock—and imagining that she herself had left it there, secured the door, and put the key in her pocket — proceedings which made the young gentlemen in the fruit-room feel rather uncomfortable.

“Here’s a pretty go,” said Ned; “we’re done for now!”

“If she comes up again,” said Bernie, “I’ll ask her to let us out, and not tell Miss Crewe. She’ll give me sums to do all day to-morrow, if she finds I’ve been here.”

“Oh, bother Miss Crewe! she isn’t *my* governess,” said Ned; “but if your mother finds us out, she’ll pack me off to London in double quick time; and I’d much rather spend my holidays here. You’re a nice fellow, Ernie; this is the second mess we’ve got into through you.”

“It was all for your good I did it,” said Ernie; “and you’re a thankless creature, Ned; but I don’t believe there is such a thing as gratitude in the world. After all, there’s nothing to make such a fuss about. It’s rather cold, it’s true; but if you two fellows will make a heap of the straw that’s under the fruit (Chambers or anybody can spread it again when we’re out), we can get into

it, and be as snug as so many birds in a nest, and there's plenty to eat, that's one comfort. Bring those apples over here, Bernard; I'll hold them while Ned and you get the straw together. We shan't hurt for an hour or two: I've been in worse places myself."

"That's all very fine," said Ned, as he and Bernie set to work to arrange the straw; "but how are we to get out? We can't stop here all day."

"I should hope not; but some one will be sure to come up after a bit; and so long as it isn't that cross old cat Chambers, I don't mind who, and we must call to them to let us out. We must say we came to look at the fruit, and got locked in by mistake; in fact, I shall ask for hot elder wine, or port negus, to keep the cold from settling on my stomach. It's the least they can do for us, after being kept shut up here."

This was all very well, but neither Ned nor Bernie could take the thing quite so philosophically. And nobody did come up, for Miss Crewe had her little ones at high romps in the garden; Mr. Sydney and Mr. Grey took the young folks who were old enough to walk so far, down to the old parish church at Summerley; and Mrs. Grey,

thinking that the three boys were of his party (while Mr. Grey not seeing them, took it for granted they were with her or Miss Crewe), felt perfectly at ease about them, and when she had seen that all was in due train for dinner, went out for a little stroll with Mr. Sydney, leaving Ethie to arrange the dessert, with Ellie to assist her.

When the two girls had finished, they put on their hats and cloaks, and ran into the garden, where they swung the bairns, and chatted with Miss Crewe, and did not come into the house till the whole party returned from church.

By this time Ned and Bernie had crept out of the straw, and were looking disconsolately out of window. They were both too much afraid of Mr. Grey to call out while he was within hearing, and drew back from the window for fear he should see them.

Presently Bessy, Lillian, Ethie, and Ellie came running up the stairs, followed by Miss Crewe and the small ones, all going to get ready for dinner.

"Dear me! I was in a sweet sleep, and they've woke me!" said Ernie; "now's your time, Bernard; you'd better call out, and let them know we're here."

"There's Miss Crewe on the stairs; don't you

wish it!" said Bernie; "I'm not going to let her know anything of this business, if I can help it."

"Well, we must get out, you know," said Ernie; "besides, it's nearly dinner-time. What's a few sums to that? Only think of the pig! you ain't going to stop up here while they're eating *him*?"

"It's precious little pig, or pudding either, we shall get, if my aunt thinks we've been helping ourselves to her apples," said Ned, ruefully; "if Ethie were passing by alone, I shouldn't mind—she's not a bad sort—but Miss Crewe's safe to tell my aunt, and a nice time I shall have of it at home, if I'm sent away from here for this piece of business."

Bernie, who, while Ned was speaking, had been alternately stamping his feet and blowing his fingers, now went again to the casement, and looked out.

"I see a chance," said he; "let's get out of the window."

"Out of the window, and break our necks?" cried Ernie; "a nice idea!"

"It's not so bad," said Ned, approvingly: "just come and see here. There's a famous footing—one can't fall. We might creep along this gutter,

round to the side, and drop down on to the roof of the wood house."

Elm Tree House was an old place ; the front portion much more so than the back, and before the two attic casements ran a deep gutter between the whole front of the house and a little parapet about a foot high. The boys might have made their escape easily this way, if, as they imagined, it had been continued round the sides, and over the roof of the wood-house, which was a small projection from the side-front of the building. But it stopped short of that ; in fact, it did not go round the side of the house at all. However, not having noticed this, they were in high spirits at the idea, and crept out of the casement. First Bernie, who would have been a shining scholar if he had only been half as clever at his books as he was at climbing, running, or anything else of the kind ; then Ernie, who was not very agile at any time, and was now seriously disinclined for what he considered a very hazardous enterprise, and who, in fact, would not have attempted it at all, but have remained where he was, and endeavoured to attract the attention of the household, if Ned, who, in trying circumstances like these, was a boy of a determined character, had not quietly but emphatically informed him, that if, through any

scrape Master Ernie drew him into, he should be expelled from Elm Tree House, he would find time and opportunity before his departure, to give him the soundest thrashing he ever had in his life. So he was hoisted up by Ned, and pulled out by the shoulders by Bernie, and so at last found himself on his feet in the gutter. Ned soon followed, and they slowly proceeded, on all-fours, for fear of being seen, one after the other.

Meanwhile, Ethie, when she had finished dressing, remembered that she had not put out any dessert for the kitchen, so she ran and fetched her little basket, and proceeded to the fruit-room to fill it. "Dear me," she thought, as she went in, "I didn't know I left the window open. It's just as well shut this cold day."

She closed and fastened it, soon filled her basket, and ran downstairs, taking care to lock the door.

Bernie was the first to discover that a descent from the gutter was impracticable, as they might as soon have attempted one from the attic window, and there was nothing for it but to retrace their steps, and return to the fruit-room.

"Here's a pretty go," said Ned; "some one's been and shut the window. It's fast!—oh, I say, we can't get in."

"Ow—ow—ow!" Ernie began in his own especial style, but Ned turned round and told him to be still, and not make that confounded riot. He shook the window, but it was useless, and the panes were too small, even if they had broken one, to allow them to get in that way. To add to their misery the snow began to fall in large flakes, and they shivered and shook with cold and fear.

The dinner-bell rang. "Oh," groaned Ernie, "do you hear that? It's no use, Ned, I can't contain my feelings any longer. Ow—ow—ow! Here's a pretty Christmas! I shall die of cold and hunger, and never live to see another. I'm famished and fainting. We must shout for help, and see if we can't make some one hear."

They all stood up now, for the case was too desperate for them to think any longer of concealment, and looked eagerly round in hopes some one might be in the garden. Nothing—nothing could be seen, but the leafless trees and the ever-greens—not a living creature; even the birds were hiding away from the falling snow.

Poor Bernie began to cry. Even a whole day at sums would be better than to be shut out here and perish with cold. Ned's rosy cheeks began to pale, and as for Ernie, he quite gave himself up for lost.

“‘The snow shall be my winding-sheet.’ I think I’ve read that in some poetry book, Ned. I never thought it would be mine. What would my mother’s feelings be if she could see me now! Ah! I daresay Chambers is dishing up. Oh, that pig! To think that we should lose it after all! I wonder if they’ll miss us. I suppose they’ll all be so busy eating, they’ll never give us a thought. Won’t think of looking for us till it is too late. Do you know if it takes long for people to die of hunger? I’ve eaten nothing since breakfast but two or three small apples, and I feel as if I shouldn’t last much longer.”

By this time, Mr. and Mrs. Grey, their guests, and children, had assembled round the dinner-table. As Ned had said, it *was* a spread, and the young people at any rate seemed fully bent upon doing it justice. But Mrs. Grey, glancing round,
* saw three vacant places, and looking to see who was missing, enquired what had become of Ned, Bernard, and Ernie.

No one knew; no one had seen them since the morning; and Bernie’s mother became alarmed. Mr. Grey, who always took things coolly, went on helping the soup, and endeavoured to reassure her, by saying nothing was more likely than that the three boys had gone out for a stroll to-

gether, without thinking it necessary to ask leave, and had gone farther than they intended, and so were behind time. It was no use, she was thoroughly uneasy and distressed, and seeing she was so, Percie and Tom Brooke said they would go and search over the grounds, while Lilian Saville volunteered to look in every room of the house for the missing ones.

The lads had not left the dining-room three minutes when they returned, almost convulsed with laughter, and scarcely able to speak. At last, Percie gasped out, "The jolliest spree!" and then laughing again leaned against the wall for support. Tom, collecting himself, said, as he wiped the tears from his eyes, "It's not to be told, Mrs. Grey; it's a sight to be seen, and never forgotten; so, as I see the soup is finished, just come outside the house for a second, while they're bringing in the second course."

Mrs. Grey looked at Mrs. Sydney, and Mrs. Sydney said, "Oh, let's go by all means," and the young people had already risen from their seats; so throwing on some cloaks and wrappers that hung in the hall, the ladies and children passed into the garden, Mr. Sydney and Mr. Grey following more leisurely, the latter being heard to mutter

something about "confounded nonsense at dinner-time."

Percie and Tom led them up the broad gravel path from which the best view of the house could be obtained, and then desired them to turn round and look towards the front of the house, and there they saw the lost boys in the oddest plight that ever three unfortunate lads got themselves into.

Bernie by this time had in some degree recovered his composure, and being, like his father, not disposed to fret about trifles, was making the best of matters by steadily munching the apples with which his pockets were well supplied, and looking about him to see if any chance of escape was in view. They had none of them seen Percie and Tom, who having gone to the farmyard to begin their search, had from thence observed their uncomfortable situation, and re-entered the house the back way, that they might not themselves be observed.

Ned's courage was now completely chilled, and he was crying in the deliberate business-like manner in which he always did cry—not making any noise about it, but steadily weeping over his misfortunes, and with his little spotted handkerchief applied every second, first to one eye,

and then to the other. As to Ernie, he had now fairly given himself up to his grief; he was sobbing and crying away as he never sobbed or cried before. "Good gracious!" said Mrs. Grey, as she looked up and saw them, "however did they get there?"

Tom shouted the question; but Bernie, throwing away the core of the apple he had eaten, and taking out another, went on with that, and made no reply. Ned, wishing to excite his aunt's compassion, only continued weeping and wiping his eyes; but Ernie, seeing there was now a hope of escape and dinner, replied with wonderful promptness, "Any fellow but you, Tom, wouldn't stand there asking questions, but come and get us down. If you ain't quick, I can tell you, it won't be of much use, for we're sinking fast with cold and hunger. Ow—ow—Miss Grey, have you got the key of the fruit-room about you? If you have, send some one up with it for mercy's sake, or we shall be perished."

Mr. Grey and Mr. Sydney both went up at once to their rescue, unlocked the fruit-room, opened the window, and pulled the boys in. Then they took them down to the dining-room, for it was no use questioning them while they were shivering and their teeth chattering with cold,

and Mrs. Grey, having meanwhile had a little hot brandy and water prepared, made them drink it off.

"Now," said Mr. Grey, sternly, as he again took his seat at table, and the housemaid uncovered the sucking-pig, "what have you three boys got to say for yourselves? I suppose, if the truth's known, you went up there after the apples, and so got locked in, and by some chance shut out of window. Isn't that it? What sort of a Christmas dinner do you think you deserve?"

Bernie hung his head, and looked rather ashamed of himself. He really had been by far the least to blame; but he was not the boy to turn round on his companions and tell tales. Ned went on steadily using his handkerchief; but Ernie set up a loud outcry, "Ow—ow—Mr. Grey, you never mean to keep me without any dinner! Just think how I've been locked up in that horrid cold room, and then shut out in the gutter, and all just for taking a peep at the apples!"

"Was a peep all you took?" said Mr. Grey, eyeing Ernie's bulging pockets suspiciously.

"Well, sir, what was I to do? I was very hungry, and there was nothing else to be had."


"It's Christmas-day," said Mrs. Sydney, good naturedly; "don't you think, Mr. Grey, they've

been punished enough? I should think it will be some time before they go into a fruit-room to take a peep or anything else."

"Well, go and wash your faces," said Mr. Grey, "and come and have some dinner." The boys ran off at once; even Ernie moving quickly. Sarah brought them some hot water, and they very soon made their reappearance, and did ample justice to the pig and pudding, and all the other good things that loaded the table of Elm Tree House that Christmas-day.

CHAPTER IX.

A VISIT TO LONDON. ERNIE'S WONDERFUL TALENT FOR NURSING, AND WHAT HE DID WITH THE BABY.

HREE days after the unhappy affair of the fruit-room—an affair which I can assure you Ned and Bernie remember to this present day—it was settled that Tom, Percie, George Sydney, Bernard, his cousin, and Ernie, should go to London, to spend a day in sight-seeing.

Tracy Randall, who was going back to town on that day, having been obliged to shorten his stay through business matters, offered to take charge of the boys on the railroad, and to put them in the way to Madame Tussaud's, which celebrated exhibition none of them but George had ever seen before.

The Egerton station being three miles and a half off, it was arranged that they should go by the Summerley omnibus, which went there twice a day to bring passengers to and from the village.

They had some difficulty in finding places, as there was such a large party; however, having succeeded in doing so, they soon arrived at the station and dismounted.

As they came down from the roof (for most of them had to ride outside, which, to hardy lads on a clear sunny frosty day, is no great hardship), they heard a lady say to the driver, "Mr. Ambrose, you'll remember to keep four inside places this afternoon; I shall come down by your omnibus, and bring three ladies with me." Ambrose touched his hat, and promised to do so, and as soon as they had taken their places, Tom said to Ernie, "You'd better look out, young one, when we come back, or you won't get an inside place, or indeed any place at all, and walking all the way from Egerton to Summerley won't suit you, I'm afraid."

"It won't, indeed," said Ernie. "In fact, I'm tired as it is—sight-seeing's a deal of trouble. I suppose, Mr. Randall, we shall find cabs at the station?"

"Cabs!" said Tracy Randall; "oh, cabs in plenty, if you've any curiosity to see what they're like; but I thought you'd been in London before. Cabs can't be novelties to a lad of your experience."

"I mean cabs to take us to the Wax-work. You don't expect us to walk to Baker-street from the Waterloo terminus?"

"Don't I?" said Tracy. "Well, if you think it such a dreadful thing, suppose you stand treat. I daresay we shall all be ready to ride, if you'll pay for the cabs."

Ernie looked rather crestfallen at this suggestion, and muttering that he had something else to do with his money, leaned sulkily back in his seat. Presently he rallied, and turning to Tom, who had a large leather satchel hanging at his side by a strap, full of sandwiches, while Percie wore a similar one containing sausage-rolls, said: "Hadn't we better have lunch? It's a long time since we left home, and I feel quite hungry after the drive through the cold air."

"Lunch!" said Tracy, looking at his watch, "why, it isn't ten yet. But there, give him a dozen or so, Tom; he's come out to enjoy himself, and I suppose we must let him do it after his own fashion."

Ernie devoured the sandwiches Tom handed him, and then began again upon the subject of riding. "It's of no use, Mr. Randall, thinking I can walk all the way to Baker-street, whatever the others can do: I shall faint by the way if I at-

tempt it, and what's the use of sight-seeing, if one can't do it comfortably?—it's making a toil of a pleasure. Ain't there omnibuses going in that direction? It's cheap enough, I'm sure—three-pence a piece!"

Here the other boys broke in, by declaring they were not going to be stived up in omnibuses, or jolted over the stones. It was a glorious bracing day, and the walk would be ten times as good fun. After a little consideration, Tracy compromised the matter by saying that he would put Ernie in an omnibus that started from the station, and passed the end of Baker-street, where he was to be sure to get out, and find his way to the Wax-work. Ernie promised to do so, and Tracy, when they came to London, saw him into the conveyance, and started off with the others, intending to walk with them as far as their roads lay together.

Ernie looked after them, and then thought—"Well, some people have strange ways of enjoying themselves. The idea of starting off at that pace!—they'll be knocked up before they've gone a mile. I'm glad I insisted on riding. A nice notion to think I was going to walk all that way!" Here his meditations were interrupted by a buxom pleasant-looking countrywoman, with a fat baby

in long clothes in her arms. As Ernie sat next the door, and the conductor was at the front, helping up a stout gentleman and his carpet-bag, she said to him, "Do, my little dear, just hold the baby for a second, while I get in; I ain't used to these kind of steps. Thank you!—and just take the basket in the other hand. Hold it so. It must not be shaken, for his bottle's in it. Why, you're quite a nurse, I declare!"

Ernie had never handled a baby before in his life; but he took the child mechanically as the woman placed it in his arms, and held the basket when she gave it him. She was almost in herself, when she cried out, "Oh, my goodness! I've forgotten my carpet-bag," and ran back to the carriage from which she had come to look for it. The conductor returning as some more passengers entered the omnibus, closed the door, and it being now full time to start, called out, "All right" to the coachman, and off the omnibus went, with Ernie in it, holding the baby.

"Stop, stop!" cried he; "stop—here!—I say, what's to be done? I can't take charge of this child! Here, conductor, I say, some woman's given me this to hold, and what am I to do with it? You must get down and go and find her."

The conductor looked puzzled, and at first

thought Ernie was endeavouring to mystify him, so he said—

“If you’ve brought the young one out for an airing, you must take care of it till you get it home again—that’s all. You don’t expect me to nurse it, do you?”

“I didn’t bring it out,” cried Ernie; “some horrid woman asked me to hold it for her while she got in, and I just took it out of sheer good nature, when she ran off and left me with it. What am I to do with a baby, I should like to know? I’ve a great mind to pitch it out of window.”

Here the rest of the people in the omnibus—who, with the exception of an old lady, were young folks come up, like Ernie, for a day’s sight-seeing—began to laugh, which aggravated him still more; but the old lady gravely lectured Ernie upon the wickedness of ill using an innocent infant, then very kindly instructed him how to hold it, taking good care, however, not to have it herself for a second. The conductor, who laughed as much as any one, when he had a little recovered his composure, and was able to speak, told him it would be a nice Christmas present to take home to his mother.

“I shall leave it in the omnibus,” said Ernie.

"I'll give you in charge for deserting it, if you do," said the conductor; "who's to prove your story, I should like to know? Nobody saw anyone give you the child; these ladies and gentlemen all found you with it when they got in the 'bus; and it's no use your thinking to palm that baby upon me. I've got six of my own to keep, and can't indulge in the luxury of any more."

The omnibus soon reached the end of Baker-street, and Ernie alighted with his burthen in his arms, for no one was civil enough to hold it even for a second while he got out. They handed him the basket, and the conductor advised him to look within it, to see if he could find anything about the baby's mother. "And I won't charge you for two, which is very considerate on my part, seeing we always put up, 'Children to be paid for.'"

And so, with the little sleeping creature in his arms, Ernie made the best of his way to Tussaud's Exhibition.

Meanwhile, the baby's mother was, as may well be supposed, in a terrible fright about the child. She secured her carpet bag, which she had forgotten in the flurry and excitement of what was her first visit to London, and ran to take her place in the omnibus, but found it gone, and no one

could tell her anything about the baby. She ran wildly about the station, crying and wringing her hands, till a good-natured policeman, who had a wife and a little one of his own, told her that, as the child was not likely to be of so much value to any one as to her, it would be sure to be taken to the nearest police station, and directed her to it, and said that he himself would tell the different omnibus and cab drivers to inquire about the baby when they left the terminus, and direct it to be taken there. So the poor creature started off in her forlorn quest to the police station, leaving the unlucky bag, which had caused all the mischief, in the charge of the railway officials.

Ernie walked very slowly towards Tussaud's. The baby was fat and heavy, and the basket bothered him, so that, though the others had walked, they were all first at the door, awaiting him.

Their astonishment, as they saw him slowly advancing towards them, with the baby and the basket, was beyond bounds. Ned opened his round black eyes in amazement, and stared steadily at his friend. Tom uttered a low, peculiar whistle, and said—"Master Ernie has been distinguishing himself again. What's up now, I wonder?" And Percie entirely forgot his grave responsibility as

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the senior of the party, and began capering about in most undignified style, snapping his fingers and springing from the ground with delight.

The sight of Ernie's face as he approached them, and they saw the mournful earnestness with which he kept his eyes fixed on the baby—afraid every second lest it should wake, and so redouble his perplexities—increased their laughter; and Ernie, who considered this truly unfeeling, said, when near enough to be heard—

"It's no laughing matter, I can tell you; I'm ready to drop with the weight of this youngster. Here, Tom, just take it for a second, will you?"

"Not if I know it," said Tom, folding his hands behind his back. "Well, young one, what have you been after now? Bought a doll for one of the girls? Why didn't you leave it till later, instead of carrying it about all day?"

"It isn't a doll," cried Ernie; "it's a baby some woman's foisted upon me." And he told his companions of the adventure he had met with, which made them laugh more than ever, till the passers-by turned round and stared, and thought such an uproarious set of youngsters had never been let loose before.

"Well, never mind, Ernie!" said Tom; "you

wanted a little quiet amusement, and this'll be just the thing!—make your holidays quite pleasant! Why, you seem born for a nurse!—the way you hold it's wonderful!"

"Let's go in," said George Sydney, who was a shy, quiet boy; "the people are staring so. Besides, Ernie must want a rest."

"And the baby must want feeding," said Tom. "Didn't its mother say the bottle was in the basket?—let's see. Ah! here it is!—all nicely wrapped up in flannel to keep it warm. Come along, Ernie: they won't charge for this young one, I daresay, or only half price if they do. Upon my word, you look quite a family man!"

They entered the Exhibition, where Ernie found himself an object of curiosity, as it is not very usual in such places to see a boy of thirteen walking about with a baby in long clothes. He looked disconsolately at one or two of the groups, then seeing a respectable old lady attentively regarding a sleeping female figure, he went up to her, and said, "Please, ma'am, would you mind taking this baby for a minute or two? It's making my arms ache awfully, and now it's beginning to cry. I haven't a notion how to keep it quiet."

The old lady made no answer, and Ernie hear-

ing a suppressed giggle behind him, turned and saw Tom enjoying his mistake. He had spoken to one of the wax-work figures. "Oh, Tom! it's all very well for you; but I'm ready to drop. What on earth shall I do with this confounded little creature?—it's beginning to cry now! How shall I quiet it?"

"Give it the bottle," said Tom; "here's a snug corner. There, sit down!—raise its head a little! That'll do: 'Pon my word, Ernie, you're fit for a nurse's situation. Poor little soul! it's hungry. A fine baby, Ernie; is it a girl or a boy? It'll do you credit if it goes on like this!"

The other lads formed a ring round Ernie, who sat the very picture of misery, applying the bottle to the baby's lips. The little one sucked vigorously, but when its hunger was appeased, began to cry again.

"Whatever's the matter with it now?" said Ernie, looking up at Tom.

"Got the wind, I suppose. Turn it round and pat its back; that's how I've seen the old women do. Really, Ernie, if you go on like this, I think they may all come to you for a lesson. Well, how talent does lie hidden, to be sure! To think that all this time, one should never have found out you'd such a wonderful knack at managing babies! I'll tell



Ernie left with the Baby.

my mother when I go home to send to you when ours is troublesome. You beat our Mary hollow !”

All this time, Tom, who, with all his love of fun, was a kind-hearted fellow, and had seen something of babies in his own home, had been guiding Ernie's movements with the child, and the little one, after a while, fell off into a sweet sleep, from which Ernie being afraid to wake it, thought it better to remain still, and see what he could of the waxwork-wonders, seated as he was. However, after a while, he beckoned to Percie, who came up to him, when he said, “Nursing's hard work, Percie ; I don't wonder now at the old women's wanting so much beer. I should like two or three of those sausage-rolls you've got in that satchel, and perhaps you wouldn't mind holding the young one while I eat them.”

“Here are the rolls at your service, and I hope you'll enjoy them,” said Percie, “which, as they're Chambers' own making, and from that very pig you were so partial to, I should say is likely. But as to taking the child, I beg to be excused. I'm not much of a nurse myself, while you seem quite an old hand at it, and I'm sure the poor little thing would find out the difference coming from you to me.”

Ernie groaned in his despair. There seemed

no getting rid of the baby! It was as bad as Sinbad's Old Man of the Sea. He ate his rolls, and then as the baby began to get restless, had, under Tom's directions, to get up and walk about with it again.

By this time the boys had seen enough of the waxwork, and wanted to go somewhere else. Percie suggested the Pantheon, where, as he said, after having seen the pictures and conservatory, they could sit down in the ante-room, leading to Marlborough-street, and eat their lunch. The boys thought this a very good idea, and they all went away together, Ernie still carrying the baby, as no one seemed willing to do it for him.

"Oh, dear," he moaned to Tom, "I think my arms will break. I do believe there never was such a fat heavy child as this. It's like a young porker. Ugh! you little wretch! It's a nice treat, isn't it, to come out for a day's pleasure, and have you to carry about all day? Don't I wish I could see your mother!"

"You mightn't find that altogether pleasant," said Tom. "Perhaps she'll give you in charge for stealing the child, and I don't see what defence you could make."

"No more do I," said Ned, gravely. "What

a queer thing to be charged with—bolting with a baby! Suppose they put you in prison, Ernie!”

“Never mind,” said Percie, “we’ll all come and see you, if they do. I wonder what amount of imprisonment they’re likely to give you, if they find you guilty. It’s the hard labour that’ll be the worst part of it; else the living’s not so bad. I don’t suppose you’d have more than a twelve-month.”

“But I *didn’t* steal the brat!” groaned Ernie, “and it’s too bad of all you fellows to make out I did. What do I want with it, I should like to know? I only wish one of you fellows would carry it for a bit. I say Bernie, just take it for a few seconds.”

Bernie folded his chubby hands together, and said, “I’m afraid I should let it fall. If it was a young puppy, or even a sucking-pig, I shouldn’t mind, but I’m not so well used to babies.”

Ernie walked on a few paces with the baby. Then a bright idea struck him. “I say, Tom, I don’t consider that I’m bound to be bothered with this brat. What’s to hinder me laying it down on that door-step? I don’t see that I’m to carry it all day, just because it’s good-for-

nothing mother thought proper to poke it in my arms."

"I'd advise you not to try that on," said Tom, "you don't know who may be looking, when the whole street's lined with windows, and a pretty state of things it would be to have you hauled up before a magistrate on a charge of deserting an infant, and exposing it to the cold. Why, it's a more serious affair even than stealing it. No, there's nothing for it, I'm afraid, but taking charge of the child till you meet with its mother. And if she never does turn up, which seems rather likely, why you must put up with the matter, and adopt it. Bring it up as your own—only the worst of it is children are expensive. It'll take all your pocket money to find it in pap—let alone the clothes."

Ernie groaned again. Then he looked at Ned, who was walking along comfortably enough with his hands in his pockets. "I say, Ned, do take this brat before I let it fall; I'm sure I shall if I have to carry it much longer."

"It'll be wilful murder if you do," said Ned, stolidly. "No, I'd rather decline carrying it, thank you. I'm not so strong as I look; and I'm sure a baby of that size would be too heavy for me."

By this time they had reached the Pantheon, where they strolled about, with the exception of Ernie, who dropped on the first seat he saw, and sat in the vestibule while the others were looking at the pictures, and teasing the parrots in the conservatory. He was so exhausted that he even forgot they would be likely to consume the remainder of the sandwiches and sausage-rolls without his help, which in effect they did, enjoying them the more on that account. When they came up to him, however, he remembered that it was luncheon time, and reminded Tom and Percie of the fact.

"Lunch !" said Percie, "why you had yours at Madame Tussaud's ; didn't I give you three great rolls myself?"

"You don't call that lunch," said Ernie ; "why it was only a snack. I didn't count that anything."

"I considered you took your lunch in the train," observed Tom, "when I gave you that heap of sandwiches. However, let's see, Percie, if we've got nothing for him." They gravely searched in the satchels, and one produced a crust of bread, and the other a portion of a sandwich without any meat, both of which Ernie indignantly rejected.

"It's time for us to be off now," said Percie. "Where shall we go to next? What do you say, Ernie?"

"Oh, don't ask me," cried that unhappy boy. "I'm quite faint with fatigue and hunger. I shall go into the next baker's we pass, and have sixpenn'orth of buns."

"You mustn't indulge in such luxuries now you've set up a baby," said Percie. "I should say if you've got a sixpence to spare, you'd better invest it in Savoy cakes for the young one's benefit."

"Let's go on further," said Ned. "It's no use wasting any more time here; and there's lots more places to be looked at."

They went out, but could not agree as to whether they should go to St. Paul's or the Thames Tunnel. Ned stoutly maintained that there was time for both, if they were quick, and the Monument into the bargain; but Percie suggested something that pleased them all much better. "Let's go to a Police Court," he said, "and hear the charges. It'll give Ernie some idea of what kind of a place it is, in case he gets into any unpleasantness about this youngster."

Away they went, Ernie looking ruefully at his baby, and attracting as much attention from the

passers-by as he had done from the visitors to Madame Tussaud's.

Percie had a motive in going to the Police Court which he had not stated to any one but Tom. He thought it would not be a bad plan to state the baby's case to the sitting magistrate, and ask his advice about it. When they were within the Court, he said to Ernie, "Now, old fellow, I'm not going to have any further responsibility about the mess you've got into. I shall expect you to tell your story to his Worship, and then he will decide at once whether or not you're to be committed for felony. Babies are property, you know, just as much as calves and lambs, and it don't suit me to be seen much longer with any one who's placed himself in the very awkward position you've done. I don't wish to make reflections on your honesty, still I must say appearances are against you. Now, it is no good howling—here's his Worship ready to give you a hearing, so just tell him all about it at once. I only hope he'll take a merciful view of the matter."

Ernie, thoroughly frightened now, set up a loud despairing cry, "Oh, please your Worship, I never, never stole it. A good-for-nothing woman put it in my arms, and ran away and left it; and I've been carrying it about ever since, and don't

know how to get rid of it. Oh, dear ! it's beginning to cry ; what on earth shall I do with it now ? ”

The magistrate looked about for an explanation, when Percie stepped forward and stated the whole affair, amidst such peals of laughter as are not often heard in a Police Court, or anywhere else ; while Tom, the whole time he was speaking, was instructing Ernie how to dandle the baby, so as to keep it quiet. When he had finished, a policeman from the Southwark station said he thought the child's mother was likely to be waiting there for it, as she had come to that place to state her loss, and had been advised to remain there by the Inspector in case of its turning up.

A messenger was despatched for her, and the poor woman, quite worn out with anxiety and fretting, soon made her appearance, and was comforted by the sight of the baby, whom she almost smothered with kisses. The lads then left the Police Court, and filled up the remainder of their time in London by a visit to the Museum, from which Master Ned was deservedly expelled for sticking a short pipe in the mouth of a Gorilla.

Percie desired him to walk up and down outside till they came out, and intimated that if he got

into any mischief in the meantime, he should take him in hand himself. A significant promise, as Ned well knew, and which had the effect of keeping him in order the rest of the day.

CHAPTER X.

ERNIE'S PLEASANT DRIVE FROM THE STATION, AND THE
MANNER IN WHICH HE ASTONISHED JOHN DALE.



WHEN they were once comfortably installed in the railway carriage, on their return home, Tom said, with an air of relief, "Well, I'm glad this day's work is so far over. Sight-seeing *is* rather trying, as you say, Ernie. We shall soon be home now; that is, if we've the luck to get places in the omnibus."

"Oh, I hope there's no fear of that," cried Ernie. "I shall never be able to walk home after going about London all day, as I've done with that baby. Ugh! how my arms ache now, as if they'd break!"

"Well, you'd better look out," said Percie; "you heard what that good lady said about bringing down three friends, and the omnibus only holds eight; *some* of us must ride outside,

that's clear, and lucky if we're able to ride at all."

"We must run down the station-steps full speed," said Tom. "Ernie, you're nearest the door—mind you jump out, and look sharp, when the train stops, unless you want a four-mile walk."

"I mean to," replied Ernie; and he kept his word, for when the boys got to the court-yard of the station, they found that he had made such good use of the start he had had, that he was already in the omnibus: they all sprang in after him, and Ned slammed the door, and shouted "all right" to the driver, who drove on at once.

By the momentary glimpse the light of the station lamps gave them of the interior of the omnibus, they saw that it was very comfortably fitted up, and the cushions felt unusually soft. "I say, it's jolly, isn't it?" said Ned; "and we have got it all to ourselves too. I suppose that stout old lady and her friends didn't come down after all."

"All the better for us," observed Bernie. "Perhaps they took a fly. I don't think there's many outside either."

"Christmas time," said Percie. "Perhaps the

regular ones have taken holiday, and come down to an early tea. I should say you'll be ready for yours when you get it, Ernie?"

"I should think so indeed, considering I've had no dinner, and nothing worth speaking of for lunch."

"Well, this is the easiest going omnibus I ever was in," remarked Percie. "I suppose Ambrose has set up a new one." It was a bright moonlight night, and the fittings of the omnibus could be very plainly seen. He scrutinized them attentively, then exclaimed, "'Pon my word, Ernie, I think we're all in a nice scrape now. I do believe we've got into old Whiteleigh's own pet private omnibus. Oh, I say, fancy him, puffing and panting up this hill! But it wont do for us to stop here; so we had better decide what's to be done?"

"Let's get out," said Ned, decisively, "before the coachman knows anything about it. Running away with an omnibus will turn out something worse than running away with a baby, if we're found out."

"Oh, but just fancy old Whiteleigh," laughed Percie. "Wont he be savage! I think I see him. Well, we've saved our sixpences at any rate, as I suppose he'd feel affronted if we offered

them to him. But what had we better do, Tom?"

"Take Ned's advice, and jump out," replied Tom, opening the door as he spoke. "Come along every one of you. We shall soon get over the rest of the ground."

"I sha'n't stir," said Ernie, decidedly; "I never walk if I can ride, and if old Whiteleigh blows me up for making free with his conveyance, I shall just tell him no gentleman has any business to keep a thing of this sort. How's the public to know it's a private affair, I wonder, when it's just like any other omnibus?"

"Oh, come, that wont do," said Percie. "You must get out, you know, and walk with the rest of us. Come, it isn't far now. We've had a famous lift."

"I don't intend to move out of this," replied Ernie, "at any rate as long as it goes my way home. Mr. Whiteleigh's to blame in the matter, not I, and so I shall tell him if he says anything."

"Well, it's no use talking," said Tom, "there's six of us, and we can't all be brought into a scrape for the sake of one. Let's jump out, and leave Master Ernie to speak his mind to Mr. Whiteleigh. I've no doubt he'll do so if he's

the chance. Come along, boys, and let's run home."

After one more useless remonstrance from Percie, the boys all leaped out but Ernie, and the omnibus went on its way, with him for its sole occupant.

Meanwhile, Mr. Whiteleigh, on reaching the station, had first looked about to collect the party of friends he had brought with him from London, as they had not been all able to obtain seats in the same carriage. They were staying at his house, but had gone up to town in the morning, and the omnibus had been ordered to meet, and bring them home to dinner. He was surprised not to see it when they came down stairs, and out in the station-yard, as his coachman, a steady, sober man, had never been behind his time before.

"The stable clock's too slow again, I suppose," he said to himself; "I must see to it myself to-morrow."

He turned to his party, and politely expressing his regret at the delay, asked them if they would go inside, and warm themselves by the fire in the booking-office. As they were all hungry, they thought it would be better to walk and meet the conveyance, especially as the night

was fine, and there were no ladies of the party. So off they started, looking earnestly out for the omnibus, but looking in vain.

Mr. Whiteleigh felt very cross. Something must have happened, he said. Would they turn back, and let him engage a couple of flies? To this his friends objected that it would be all so much lost time. They might yet meet the carriage, and if they did not, they should be home sooner than if they turned back to the station and waited for other conveyances.

On they walked. There were two steep hills between the station and Mr. Whiteleigh's pretty villa, which stood on the high road to Egerton, and was about a mile and a half from Elm Tree House.

Some of the gentlemen were stout; none were very young, and before they had got half way, they began to wish they had adopted Mr. Whiteleigh's suggestion, and obtained flies from the Station Hotel. That gentleman himself, being troubled with corns, found the journey rather trying, but at last they reached Bon-bon Lodge, for Mr. Whiteleigh had made his money in confectionery, and was not ashamed of people knowing it.

When the coachman reached his master's house,

he stopped before the principal entrance ; jumped down, opened the omnibus door, and stood expecting to see Mr. Whiteleigh and his friends get out ; but, as no one did so, he looked in and saw one small figure curled up at the further end of the seat.

“Whoever’s this?” he thought. “’Tisn’t master, that’s clear. “Hallo, you sir! how came you here?”

Ernie looked up, and coolly said, “You brought me.”

The coachman stood and stared. This was no explanation at all ; but as the young gentleman in the carriage did not appear disposed to give any other, he continued, “My ’osses did, I know—but what business have you in Mr. Whiteleigh’s own private ’bus? and where’s my master, I should like to know?”

“That I can’t tell you, my good man,” replied Ernie, “as I haven’t the pleasure of his acquaintance, and shouldn’t know him if I saw him. But I think it’s a very foolish thing of him to start a vehicle of this kind. Why can’t he do like other gentlemen, and keep his brougham or his phaeton, instead of a vulgar affair like this, I wonder?”

“Well,” said John Dale, “of all the cool,

cheeky youngsters I ever met, this one's the worst. Why, you don't mean to say you've been and took this for a public conveyance, and let me drive you all the way from the station, and leave my master and his friends behind? I thought I heard half-a-dozen, at least, of you get in, and made sure it was all right, though I didn't look round, having enough to do to hold my 'osses in, as they're that sperety they want to be off almost afore they've got their load. Well, this is a pretty go. What's to be done now? I wonder whether master came down by that train?"

"I'm sure I can't tell you," said Ernie; "but it appears to me the only thing you have to do is to drive me on to my journey's end, or at least as far as Ambrose would have brought me, if I had not made a mistake, and taken this ridiculous affair for his."

"Well, you're a cool hand, I think," cried John Dale, "to suppose I'm going to drive you all the way to Summerley Common. Anything else, I should like to know! But where's my master all this while? He must be coming by the next train. If he'd been down by this, he'd never have let you get in, and run away with his carriage, as you've done. Come, turn out—you ain't going to stop there all night."

"No, but I'm going to stop here till you take me home. A likely story, indeed, that I'm to walk that dark, lonely road by myself! I wish you'd be quick, instead of standing chattering there. I've had no dinner, nor lunch either worth naming, and I'm faint for want of my tea. Now do shut the door, and drive on, there's a good fellow. It's not so pleasant to sit here with the wind driving in."

"I'm not going to stand any more of this nonsense," cried John Dale; "you just turn out, young one, and don't keep me fooling here.—Oh, Mrs. Dobson, do come this way! It's the rummiest start I ever knew in my life."

The person thus accosted by John Dale was a round, rosy, good-tempered looking woman, of about forty, Mr. Whiteleigh's housekeeper, he being a widower. She had come to the hall-door, to see what was amiss, hearing John's voice in high dispute, and seeing nothing of her master or his friends.

John told her the state of matters, and pointed Ernie out to her. She looked curiously into the vehicle at him.

"Dear me! a nice-looking little fellow. Gentleman's son, I should say. Who is he, John; do you know?"

"No, and don't care. To think of my driving my 'osses all up those hills for him! What had I better do, Mrs. Dobson?"

Mrs. Dobson was about to reply, when she saw her master and his friends entering the garden. "Oh, here you are, sir; I'm so glad; I was afraid something had happened. I hope you haven't had to walk through John's stupid mistake."

"*My* mistake!" roared John; "it's all along o' this confounded little varmint in the carriage it's happened. I beg your pardon, sir," touching his hat to his master, "but it's enough to make a saint swear. Here have I been a coming along thinking I'd you and these gentlemen inside, and nobody but this young impudence, who gets in at the station, while I was holding in the 'osses, as they wanted to be off, shuts the door, holloas out 'all right,' lets me bring him all this way, and then wants me to drive him on to Summerley, where he says he lives."

Mr. Whiteleigh had by this time recovered his breath, which the long walk from the station had pretty well exhausted. He looked sternly at Ernie, who was leaning back in a very comfortable position, seeming perfectly at his ease, and by no means inclined to stir, and said—

"Well, sir, what's the meaning of this? Im-

posing on my coachman, and making use of my horses! What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Why how on earth could I tell," replied Ernie, "that anyone would set up an omnibus, and call *that* a private carriage? I don't see that you've anything at all to complain of, sir. I jumped in, naturally thinking it was Ambrose's, and now your coachman actually expects me to get out and walk the rest of the way to Summerley, instead of driving me on as he's bound to do. Why, I'm likely to be robbed and murdered on the way. There's sure to be gipsies and tramps about, and no respectable person's safe after dark in these lonely parts. I wish you'd tell him to be quick, and take me on to Elm Tree House, which I'm anxious to reach before tea's quite over."

"Bashful youth, very!" said one ruddy pleasant-looking gentleman, when Ernie had finished. "Really Whiteleigh, as he puts the case, I think you can do nothing else than send him home in your conveyance, 'pon my word, I don't."

"He looks delicate, sir," said Mrs. Dobson, "and it's not a nice road after dark, and dinner's spoiling, and it wouldn't take John long now his horses are up, to take the young gentleman on to Summerley Common, and I really think it was a

very natural mistake. If anything was to happen to him, sir, you'd never forgive yourself."

Mrs. Dobson was privileged, and Ernie's fair delicate-looking face had found its way to her heart. Mr. Whiteleigh was good-natured, and he could hardly help laughing himself now at the blunder Ernie had made, so he said, "Well, young man, look a little more closely the next time you get into a carriage, and make sure whether it's private property or not. I'll send you home this time, but I'd advise you to be more careful for the future. John, just take him on to Summerley Common; a child like that's not safe to be out on these dark roads alone."

"Thank you, sir," said Ernie. "Good night. Now, John, look sharp, for I want my tea."

John obeyed his master to the letter of his directions, and the letter only, for he brought Ernie to the end of the high road known as Summerley Common, and no further; and Ernie, seeing John was determined not to proceed, got out, and had a full half mile's walk before he reached Elm Tree House, where he arrived almost famished, and completely knocked up by his hard day's work.

However, the sight of Mrs. Grey's tea-table had a wonderfully renovating effect upon him. But

it was not till he had devoured as much as any two of the other boys, that he was induced to tell them how he got on after they separated, when they all agreed that he had managed the matter wonderfully well, and that old Mr. Whiteleigh had behaved like a trump.

CHAPTER XI.

NED'S NOTIONS OF FISHING, AND WHAT CAME OF THEM.



THINK I have alluded, in Mrs. Grey's account of Master Ned's exploits in the summer holidays, to a deep pond in the gardens of Elm Tree House, where that young gentleman went angling for tittlebats. It was not a promising place to go fishing in, being generally over-grown by duck-weed, and the bank around it shelved so steeply, that it was not very easy to obtain a firm and pleasant seat ; but as Ned had been, with all the other boys, strictly forbidden to go there, the place naturally had special attractions for him.

The old fence of the pond having completely given way the preceding autumn, Mr. Grey had it renewed, and at his wife's special request, by a very stout close paling full five feet high, so constructed that no boy, however good a climber, could get over it. For as she said, "A mere padlock seems of no use. Little Jamie was

trying to get over the fence last summer, and Harry, fat as he is, really succeeded in doing so, and might have been drowned but for the nettles stinging his poor little plump legs, and making him roar till everyone in the house heard him, and ran to his rescue. So we will have a fence this time that shall keep every boy, great or small, from getting near the pond."

Mrs. Grey knew a great deal about boys, but she had yet to learn what they could do in the way of mischief when really well disposed that way.

The pond was only used in summer, when the water served for the garden; and occasionally when the more shallow one in the field ran dry, the ducks were turned in it for a while; but all the winter scarcely anyone went near it, excepting the gardener, when his work lay in that direction. It looked dreary and cold now, but in fine weather, for a pond in a kitchen garden, it was not an ugly one, as a very fine weeping willow hung over it on the one side, and a damson tree partially shaded it on the other, which last, if it had not been too old to bear removal, Mrs. Grey would certainly have had placed elsewhere, as the finest and ripest damsons made a point of falling, as soon as they were fit

to be gathered, into the water. The bank, too, round it was always green and fresh looking, with plenty of wild flowers growing on it ; and on one side of the pond, a narrow winding path led you under some fine elder trees to a little summer-house, where Bernie and Jamie, in fine weather, played at Robinson Crusoe and his man Friday ; and the path by the front brought you to a little grove of nut trees, that terminated in an arbour sheltered by hornbeams, where there were seats and table room for a score ; and which, in sultry summer days, formed the pleasantest school-room you can imagine for the Elm Tree House children.

The morning after their return from London was, for the time of year, unusually mild and warm. The frost had gone in the night ; the wind had changed from north to south ; and the sun shone so genially that, if it had not been for the leafless trees, it would have been difficult to believe it was the end of December.

Ernie had decidedly refused to get up that morning to breakfast. He sent a polite message down to Mrs. Grey that he was so utterly done up by walking about London with that immense baby in his arms, that he felt quite stiff and unable to move, and should be much obliged if she

would send him up some hot roll, a slice of ham, some bread and marmalade, and anything else she thought suitable for the breakfast of any one who was not particularly well.

Mrs. Grey laughed at the message, and saying, "I think he may well be tired to-day," asked Miss Crewe to place a little tray ready for him, which that young lady very readily did, and in a manner that gave Ernie ample satisfaction when he saw it.

He got up about twelve, and descended to the dining-room, where, to his great annoyance, he found Mr. Sidney in the easy chair that was his own especial favourite; while Mr. Grey was in the other, and the paper was divided between them.

"No chance of comfort here," thought Ernie; "and I shall be worse off in the drawing-room if Mrs. Sidney's there, for she'll make me hold her knitting cotton, to wind, as she did the other day; and Mrs. Grey and she chatter so, there's no such thing as quiet in the same room where they are. I'll take a turn in the garden, and see what Ned's about. A little fresh air always gives one an appetite for dinner."

It was some time before he saw Ned, but at last he found him, with his hands in his pockets,

surveying the palings round the pond. He was quite lost in thought, and did not perceive Ernie till he addressed him.

"Nice day, Ned, isn't it? Have you any idea what there's going to be for dinner?"

"Not the slightest, but I've a notion one might do something here in the way of supper!"

"Supper!—here?—why all the fruit's gathered. Do you think of setting traps for the birds or the squirrels in the nuttery?"

"Not a bit of it. But what do you say to fish?"

"How's it to be had?—and who's to cook it?"

"There's lots in this pond, I'm positive. Waitson's told me so many a time." Waitson had formerly been the gardener at Elm Tree House, and had been given to enliven the monotony of his work by telling very marvellous tales to Ned and Bernie, whenever he had an opportunity. He was as sober and grave-looking as Ned—rarely smiled; but would repeat the most improbable stories to the boys with the greatest composure. Some of these had reached Mrs. Grey's ears, but the man looked so stolid, she set them down to his own ignorant belief in them, but those who were more intimately acquainted with Mr. Wait-

son than his mistress, were perfectly aware he was by no means so stupid as he looked.

"He told me," continued Ned, "that before we came here, this pond was regularly used as a fish pond, and the family (a much larger one than ours) used to dine once a week, being Catholics, off what they caught here, besides having it always handy for suppers and company. I tried it myself last summer, but just as I got comfortably settled, aunt saw me, and packed me off. It was an open fence then round it; but with these palings, once over, no one can see you, which is a great advantage. Waitson told me, too, what bait to use, and yesterday I managed to get some while you were all in the Museum. Look here." Ned produced some pretty-looking flies, and surveyed them with the air of a connoisseur. "Beauties, ain't they? better than life. Then look here what I've got for a rod and line." He glanced cautiously round, then took Ernie up the nuttery, and pulled out from the grass, where it lay hidden, a large driving whip. "Ryder's got two, so he can very well spare one till we've done with it, and so I keep it handy till we can find a chance of using it, which I hope we shall manage to do this afternoon."

"Well, I don't object to fishing," said Ernie,

"it's not bad in fine weather, especially if you've anybody with you to fasten the bait on, and take the fish off when it's hooked. But it's rather cold, isn't it, now, for it?—besides, how are you to get over the palings to catch the fish? and, when you've caught it, how's it to be cooked?"

"I've thought of all that," replied Ned. "It isn't at all cold to-day; and, with our great coats on, we shall be as snug on the bank inside, as need be. As to the getting over, I'll manage that when the time comes, and so far as the cooking goes—just come here, my boy."

He took Ernie to the summer-house, and removed some empty sacks and pieces of matting the gardener had stowed there out of his way, and from underneath them produced, with an air of triumph, an old rusty gridiron, and a small stock of firewood.

"There! What do you think of that? We'll have a fire to ourselves, you know, and cook the fish as soon as we've caught it. They can't see the smoke from the house, because of those trees. Look! I've got matches and all. I found the gridiron on the muck heap. I suppose Chambers was too proud to use it any more, but I've rubbed and polished it up, and now, see here—why, it's

as good a gridiron as any one need have. I say, won't the fish be jolly?"

"When we've caught it," said Ernie, rather dubiously.

"Well, we'll see about that after dinner. Don't you be afraid. Waitson knew better than to deceive me. Just come out quietly, and meet me here at three o'clock, and we'll soon have some fish."

Ernie walked back to the house, turning over Ned's project in his mind. There was no doubt the fish would be excellent, and there was no reason why there should not be fish in a pond, so deep and large. The cooking also might be managed, —thanks to that convenient little summer-house, and there was no question that a supply of cold broiled fish would be very handy in their bedroom, when they couldn't have it hot; but the great difficulty was to get at the pond itself, owing to that tall straight fence. He really did not see how they could get over that. However, he kept his appointment with Ned, and was by the pond a few minutes after three.

"Now," said Ned, "I've been busy since I spoke to you this morning. Come round to the further side of the pond, where we can't be seen

from the house, and I'll soon show you how we'll get over this fence."

Ernie followed him as directed. The part of the garden they were now in, and which lay between the pond and the end-wall, was the most unfrequented portion of all, some wild-looking currant trees and shrubs generally having it pretty well to themselves. Here Ned, with an air of intense satisfaction, pointed to a short ladder, which Ryder, the gardener, was in the habit of using when he pruned the trees. There was also a wooden chair with the back broken off, which Chambers kept in the great stone larder, to stand on when she hung the meat up. "Now," said Ned, "we'll stand on this chair, and lower the ladder over, then get down by that, sit on the bank, and fish away. Here's the tackle; you shall have first go, and then I'll begin. Come along, and let's get over."

The getting over was very soon managed, but the difficulty was to keep their footing when there, and as to sitting on the bank, it was more like sliding, it was so steep and slippery.

"Don't like it at all," said Ernie; "I'll tell you what, Ned, I'll leave the fishing to you, for it's as much as I can do to keep my seat. Besides, my

arms ain't fit to hold the rod, they're so shaky with carrying that lump of a baby yesterday, and you know it ought always to be held firm."

Ned sat down and took the rod, but no fish came. He waited and waited, changed his bait for another, but with no success. "They won't rise to-day," at last he said in disgust, "and it's no use trying. I suppose they're sleepy in cold weather. I'm afraid we must give it up as a bad job, Ernie, for it's dreadfully cold sitting here. My fingers are quite numbed."

"So are mine," said Ernie, and I'm quite tired of it. So just fix the ladder steady, and hold it firm while I get out. Then I'll stand on the chair, and do as much for you."

The ladder had been easily enough embedded in the soft earth of the bank, but all this while it had been sinking deeper and deeper, and the loose shifting soil crumbling away beneath it. Ned held it as directed, though he had enough to do to keep his own footing, and Ernie ascended. He was on the top rung of the ladder, when the treacherous earth gave way beneath him, and both he and the ladder were precipitated into the pond. Ned went in too, but not falling with such force as Ernie, and only near the side of the pond, he soon scrambled out, but Ernie, who had

been thrown towards the centre, only saved himself from drowning by clinging to the ladder.

Both boys were unable to speak at first, but Ernie having, with some difficulty, succeeded in getting a seat on the ladder, made use of it as a raft, and after puffing, panting, and spitting out a great deal of not very clean water, indignantly addressed Ned :

“ You little idiotic donkey ! whatever did you mean by bringing me here ? Why don’t you come and help me, instead of sitting there screwed up like a monkey ? Fishing, indeed ! I think it’s much more likely I shall make food for the fishes than ever they’ll make food for me. Can’t you climb over the fence, and get some one to help me out ? I shall catch my death of cold, and be drowned into the bargain. It’s dying twice over—ow—ow—ow—it’s all through my good nature in coming to keep you company that I’ve got into this mess, and I don’t suppose I shall ever get out of it alive. Oh dear ! oh dear ! whatever shall I do ! ”

“ Do ! ” said Ned, surlily ; “ why, just leave off making such a confounded clatter, and try and float the ladder here, where I can pull it to the bank. I’ll help you if you’ll help yourself. But you’re as bad as a girl. If ever you get in a

scrape, you can do nothing but howl and cry, and blame every one else for your own stupidity."

"Well! I thought Tom Brooke was an unfeeling fellow; but I never came near any one equal to you. Just as if I could help falling into the water, or should ever have got into it, but for my good nature and kindness to you. Ugh!—it's dreadfully cold—my teeth won't keep still a minute. You don't consider that I'm wet all through."

"Oh yes, I do, for you can't be wetter than I am. But why can't you take things quietly? What we've got to do is to get over this fence, and take off our clothes before any one finds they're wet. Just push the ladder this way, and I'll pull it in."

"I can't," cried Ernie. "I shall be drowned if I do. This pond's ten feet deep, I've heard Mr. Grey say. And if I don't get drowned, the cold will kill me. If you ain't sharp, Ned, in getting assistance, I shall be frozen. That'll be a worse job for you than if your aunt finds out what you've led me into. Well, if you won't call out, I will—Ryder—Tom—Miss Crewe—I'm drowning! Some one bring a rope and pull me out."

"If you don't hold your noise," said Ned, "I'll

throw this stone at you ; if you will only be quiet we shall get out of this precious affair right enough ; but if we're found out, I shall be packed off to London to-morrow, and a nice story my aunt 'll have to tell my father. Why don't you manage to float yourself here ? ”

“ Because I can't,” roared Ernie ; “ and ain't going to be drowned to please you—Ryder !—Ryder !—I say, I'm drowning.”

Ryder was quite at another part of the garden, but he thought he heard his name, and followed the sound.

“ It seems to me to come from the pond,” he said to himself, “ but no one, surely, can have got over *that* fence. There's no knowing, though, what boys will do.”

Ryder spoke from experience, having four or five of his own to look after. He was a staid steady, respectable man, very fond of children, and a great friend of Bernie's. He walked up to the pond, and looked over. “ Why, Master Elton, however did you come there ? Is that you, Master Ned, on the bank ? Why, you're both dripping wet ! ”

“ Oh, please, Ryder, let us out. Haven't you got the key ? ” they both cried, and Ned added,

"Don't say anything to my aunt, or I shall be packed off to-morrow."

Ryder could not help laughing at the predicament the boys had got into, but he cautioned Ernie not to move, but to sit as quietly as he could, and he would soon have him out, and walked back to the coach-house, where he kept his keys, for the one belonging to the pond.

As he went there, he met Percie and Tom. They saw him go to the coach-house, take his bunch of keys, and walk back towards the kitchen garden.

"Whatever is he going there for with the keys?" said Percie. "There's nothing but the pond to be kept locked. There's something up, Tom. He isn't going to water his plants at this time of year."

Ryder turned back; he had forgotten something, and went to the place where he kept his tools, and selected a long rake—this was to pull the ladder out with.

"What's up now, Ryder? Anything wrong with the pond?"

Ryder smiled. "Only Master Elton's gone a sailing on it, in a new kind of boat, and I'm afraid he'll be upset if he isn't soon brought to land."

He told them, in a few words, what he had seen, and walked briskly to the rescue.

Percie rushed up into the drawing-room. His mother and Mrs. Sydney were there with Lilian. He beckoned her out; then rushing up into the play-room, where he found Miss Crewe, Ethie, and Bessy Sydney engaged in needlework, while the small ones were playing with their toy bricks, he burst out with, "Oh, I say, come in the back garden. It's the richest game you ever heard of. Where's Sarah? She'll give an eye to these young ones while you come. Miss Crewe, I'll never forgive you if you don't."

"Whatever are they all going down the back garden for?" said Mrs. Sydney, as she raised her head from her book, and looked out of the drawing-room window. "Just as it's getting dark, too. And there's Bessy without anything on her head. She'll certainly catch cold."

"Let's put something on our heads, and go and see," said Mrs. Grey. "I expect there's some mischief afloat I ought to be acquainted with."

The two ladies ran into Mrs. Grey's bed-room, which was close to the drawing-room, put on a couple of wraps, and hastened down the back garden.

The key of the pond was very rusty, through want of use, and Ryder had not succeeded in opening the gate when they arrived there. But they had no need to question him as to what he was about, or to ask Ethie and Bessy why they were laughing, for Ernie's voice was distinctly audible.

"If you ain't quick, Ryder, it will be all up with me. My feet are frost-bitten already, and I shall soon be stiff all over."

"Whatever *has* that boy been doing now?" said Mrs. Grèy, and she went to the side of the pond, stood on tip-toe, and looked over. "Oh, Ryder! Ryder! if you ain't quick he'll be drowned. Ned, you're a dreadful boy!—how came you in such a place?"

"It's all up with *me* now," thought Ned. "I shall be in Finsbury-square to-morrow." He pulled out his handkerchief and began wiping his eyes, but it was not of much use, as, like everything else about him, it was sopping wet. However, he did the best he could, under the circumstances; looked exceedingly penitent, and went on wiping away, though he only made his face wetter than ever. Tom, who was not quite tall enough to see over the palings, swung himself up on the willow tree, so that he looked right down on Ernie.

"You're in a very pleasant position, young one," he called out to him; "trying a new kind of canoe, eh? Why didn't you wait for warmer weather? It's his visit to the Museum that's put this in his head, Mrs. Grey. He saw a great deal about savage life and ways there, and I suppose he thought he'd see what sort of a one he'd make himself."

Mrs. Sidney, who was not tall enough to look over, now ran up to the gate, as Ryder opened it, and looked in.

"Good gracious! only look at that boy! It's a mercy he isn't drowned. Why, he's sopping wet, I declare."

Here Mrs. Grey turned to Ethie, and charged her to run up to the house, and give orders that warm-baths and a fire in their bedrooms should be got ready at once.

"Keep steady!" said Ryder, as he threw out the rake, and caught hold of the ladder between the rungs. "Don't move now, and I'll soon pull you in."

He brought Ernie safely to the border of the pond, and then Ned and he scrambled out, two drenched, miserable-looking objects. They were taken up to the house, full speed, had their baths, and were snugly tucked up, and having some hot port negus, were very soon fast asleep, but not

before Master Ned had been informed by his aunt that she intended to write to his father that evening, and that his stay at Elm Tree House was likely to be considerably shortened.

CHAPTER XII.

THE VISIT TO MILFORD CHASE. HOW EBNIE STARTLES
THE POACHERS, AND NED THE GAMEKEEPERS, AND
THEY BOTH TAKE TEA AT LORD SANDOWN'S.



THE next morning, the first object that met Mrs. Grey's eyes, as she went to her dressing table, was a large circular-like letter, addressed to herself, and bearing neither stamp nor post mark. It certainly had not been there when she went to bed, so she could only suppose Sarah had brought it up with the hot water. She opened it, and saw a round-robin full of signatures, above which was written—

“The humble petition of the young folks of Elm Tree House, Sheweth, that they are deeply concerned at the unfortunate position in which two of their number have placed themselves, and sincerely regret that they should, by their over-venturesome conduct, have incurred the displeasure of the mistress of the mansion, whose hospitalities they are now enjoying. More espe-

cially do they lament the fate of Edward Saville, commonly known as Ned, inasmuch as he is threatened with banishment from Elm Tree House, and its demesnes, with all the pleasant and congenial society therein assembled, to the smoke-dried precincts of Finsbury Square, where for the remainder of his holidays he will find no other companions than the sooty sparrows of the vicinity, should the sentence passed upon him be carried into effect. They offer no palliation of his conduct; they say nothing in excuse of the projected supper off pork chops; of the invasion of the fruit room, or of the recent attempt at a new mode of navigation. But they would humbly suggest that he and his companion are *boys*; that from time immemorial it has been said, and in great probability will be said in all time to come, 'Boys will be boys,' and therefore it is generally considered that nothing but an erratic course of conduct is to be expected from them.

"But your petitioners humbly request for this once, the condonation of the past offences of the said delinquents, and they offer themselves as sureties for their good behaviour until and on the 6th of January, commonly known as Twelfth-cake Day. They have been moved to this by

the deeply-expressed regret for past offences, manifested by the aforesaid Ned and his fellow-culprit, and the heartfelt sorrow they have shewn at the prospect of losing the cake, and the attendant charms of Twelfth-day. In fact, so deep is the contrition of the former, and so palpably shown, that your petitioners fear that, unless mercy is extended to him, he will neither have handkerchiefs left to wipe his eyes, nor eyes for handkerchiefs to wipe.

“Your petitioners hope for the best from your well-known clemency and moderation, and will ever pray, &c.

“(Signed.)”

They were all there—Miss Crewe, Lilian, Ethie, Tom, Percie, Bessy, George Sydney, and Bernie; and even the small boys who could not write had done their best, and affixed each his mark. There was another name, too, that of Tracy Randall, who had come back the previous evening, and who Mrs. Grey shrewdly suspected had had the principal hand in drawing up the petition. She understood now the attraction that had drawn them all up to the play-room, and caused the Sydneys and herself to spend such an unusually quiet evening.

After breakfast, she had a little quiet talk with

Tom and Percie, who both promised her they would do their best to keep the two unfortunates in order, if she would only allow them to stay, and partake of the twelfth-cake, which they were terribly concerned at the idea of losing. So upon this she consented to overlook their past offences, and as they both had caught bad colds, which confined them to the upper part of the house, they were more easily looked after, and Twelfth-day arrived, without either of them having suffered any fresh disaster.

"Those fellows seem to be going on pretty well now," said Percie, on the morning of that day. "We've had quite a quiet house since that affair of the pond. I almost begin to wish they'd do something outrageous, just to enliven us."

"It's too good to last," said Tom. "I expect we shall be enlivened, as you call it, before long. It's not in the nature of things for Master Ernie to keep out of a scrape much longer."

They were all very busy at Elm Tree House on Twelfth-day. Some young visitors were expected in the evening, and there was to be a little dance in the drawing-room. "Not a quiet corner in the house," groaned Ernie, "everything turned topsy-turvy. Dancing, indeed! the most ridiculous thing possible. The supper's all very

well. There's some sense in that, but what's the good of all this fuss about decorating the rooms, and setting out the tables? Just as if the things wouldn't eat quite as well without all this nonsense of artificial flowers and cut paper!"

"Never mind," said Ned, "there will be a stunning tuck-out. I've been in the kitchen,—chased the dog there on purpose, that I might have an excuse to go in and fetch him out; and Chambers *is* busy, I can tell you. Ethie's helping her with the tarts, and Lilian and Bessy Sydney are all at work too. So's your sister Ellie; all doing something or other for to-night; it'll be a prime affair, and no mistake."

"Yes, the supper; but what's the good of all this to do? Oh, dear, I wish it was dinner-time."

Dinner-time came an hour sooner than he expected, so that there might be plenty of time afterwards for the supper table to be set out to the best advantage. Ethie and Lilian were just beginning to do so, when an important want was discovered. There were no crackers! and none to be obtained nearer than Milford, two miles off. Ethie looked very blank at first, when she discovered this omission, but brightened up, saying, "Well, there are plenty of boys about the place.

Let's make them of use for once, and send one or two down to the pastry-cook's at Milford."

"I'll go," said Ned, goodnaturedly; "tell me all about it, and I'll soon run and fetch the crackers for you."

"That's a good boy," said Ethie; "and you may as well take Ernie with you. The run will do him good; and keep him out of mischief." She was really glad of an excuse to get Ernie out of the house, for as soon as they began preparations, he kept poking and peeping about, and she had detected him in the china closet, of which I have spoken as opening from the dining-room, and where for convenience sake the creams, jellies, and blanc-manges that had been prepared the day before were placed for the present. She told her mother as much, and Mrs. Grey then desired Ned to go at once to Milford, and take Ernie with him.

That young gentleman was now in the drawing-room, having been peremptorily sent there by Ethie, after his foray in the china closet; and to his intense disgust, Mrs. Sidney made him help her arrange the furniture, so as to leave more room for dancing.

"Come along, Ernie," said Ned; "you and I have got to go to Milford."

"Wh—a—t!" cried Ernie, opening his eyes in horror, and, overcome by the prospect, sinking down in the nearest chair.

"Just the thing for you," said Mrs. Sidney. "Much better than idling about the house; and you haven't been out this morning. It will be a nice little run."

"Nice little run!" groaned Ernie, "why Milford's two miles off if it's a step."

"Never mind," said Ned, "we shall soon do it. It's to the pastry-cook's for crackers."

"The pastry-cook's! why that's a mile on into the town. I went there the other day with Mrs. Grey, when she took me for a drive. That's three miles there, and three back; that's six altogether. It'll kill me, Ned. I really can't do it."

"Well, you can put off dying till you come back," said Mrs. Sidney, "but make haste now; for as you *must* go when Mrs. Grey says so, the sooner the better, or you may be too late for tea."

Ernie rose from his chair, and mournfully went down the stairs, and into the hall, where he put on his great coat and cap, then followed Ned out, and descended the long steep straggling hill, that winds through Summerley, and on to Milford, grumbling the whole time, till they reached the

pastry-cook's. Ned, on the contrary, enjoyed the walk after his recent confinement to the house ; rather too much so indeed, as he occasionally forgot to behave himself with a due regard to propriety. He made faces at the old women, and asked the young ones when the wedding-day was to be, chased every pig he met, had a spirited encounter with a butcher's boy, and another with a couple of the National School boys, in both of which he distinguished himself, and came off with flying colours, though he arrived at Milford, enriched with a pair of black eyes.

Ned read out his commission to the young woman behind the pastry-cook's counter, and she made the crackers up into a small parcel for him, which he stowed away in his great coat pocket, and then Ernie and he sat down to solace themselves after their walk, by consuming as many jam tarts and puffs as their finances would allow, after which they began to think of returning.

"I never can walk it," said Ernie ; "I'm ready to drop as it is. Don't you think there's a chance of our getting a lift in something going our way."

"Perhaps there is," replied Ned!; "we'll look out and see." They walked down the town a little way, when he exclaimed, "There's Burrows's

cart. That's it standing at the grocer's door. Perhaps he'll take us home."

"He isn't going our way," said Ernie; "he seems coming up the town."

"Oh, he'll turn round presently, when he's done his errands. He must, you know, to get home, and he never has his horse and cart out late. We'll go and ask him to give us a ride."

The cart of which they spoke was a small covered one, belonging to the baker at Summerley, who supplied Mrs. Grey with flour, and with bread, when through any chance the home-made ran short. But neither he nor any of his men was driving it now, as he had lent it to his cousin, the head gamekeeper of Lord Sandown, a nobleman who resided in a large and beautiful park at the end of the town.

There had been a sale of furniture at Summerley, and the gamekeeper being in want of another bedstead, and a few miscellaneous articles for the use of his increasing family, had looked in to see if he could meet with any bargains. The things went cheap, and he found himself the possessor, not only of the bedstead, but of three chairs, and a washstand and table. The baker goodnaturedly offered to lend him one of his horses, and the covered cart, which he was not

using himself that day, so that he might take them home at once. Smith, the gamekeeper, accepted the offer, and promised to send both horse and cart up early the next morning by his eldest son. He was now on his way home, and had just stopped at a grocer's to get two or three trifles his wife had charged him to bring her.

Ned slipped up to him as he was about to ascend the cart, and asked if he would give them a lift, as they were going his way.

"Ain't got no room!" he replied: "besides, the horse has got a good load as it is." This was true enough, but both Ned and Ernie considered themselves much affronted by the answer; and the cart rattled away and left them standing looking after it. Presently, the driver stopped at a small huckster's, took out a basketful of bread and flour, and went in the shop with it.

"Now's our time!" said Ned; "look sharp, old fellow!" They ran after the cart, and while Smith was busy unpacking the loaves and placing them on the counter, they sprang in at the back, and nestled down between the furniture and a couple of large empty baskets, whose contents Smith had left elsewhere on his road to Milford. It was now between the lights, but they were only beginning to turn on the gas, as in country towns

they are more chary over it than in London. Smith came out, put in the basket, and jumped up quickly, as he was now in a hurry to get home. The boys lay quite still, afraid to move or speak, lest they should be detected; in fact, I think, as far as comfort went, Ned would much rather have walked, only the principle of the thing sustained him; as he afterwards said, he felt anxious to *do* the fellow who had refused them a ride.

Smith drove on to the end of the town, then turned round, and went towards Milford Chase. This, the boys imagined, was the road to Summerley, as they were in utter darkness; and what completed the mistake was, that Smith having a message to take to one of the lodge keepers, drove outside the park to do so, then came back, entered it, and went on full speed towards his own residence.

This was one of the largest and prettiest lodges in the park, but it was a long way to it from the Milford entrance, and it was quite dark before they reached it, and a small drizzling rain had begun to fall. A good sized, and in the season a very pretty, garden lay before the house. Smith stopped at the gate of this, and called out, "Light here, hoy!"

"All right!" said Ned, extricating himself

from his very cramped and uncomfortable position, "we'll get out now; I long to see his face, Ernie, when we thank him for the ride we've had."

They jumped out and looked about them. A woman came to the lodge door with a lantern in her hand. Smith, seeing two figures emerge from the cart, called to her to bring it forward, and laying a hand on each of the boys, held them till she came and turned the light on their faces.

"Whoever have you got there, James?" said his wife.

"Two youngsters, who've been stealing a ride, I suppose," he replied. "What business had you getting in the cart without leave?"

"Where on earth have you brought us to?" said Ernie; "this don't look like any part of Summerley Heath."

"I don't see why it should," replied Smith, "when it's four good miles from it: so, it's there you thought you were going, did you? By George, you're done if you did! Why, you're in Milford Chase, and if you ain't quick, you're likely to be locked in all night. You've a nice walk before you, if you're going to Summerley to-night; I wish you joy of it, 'specially as it's coming on to rain."

"Ow—ow—ow!" burst forth Ernie, "I shall

be dead before I'm out of the park, let alone walking all the way to Summerley. Whatever do you mean by driving about with Burrows's cart—making people believe you're going to his place? you ought to be ashamed of yourself for imposing on the public! It's abominable!—a regular imposition! If you don't drive us back at once, I'll write to his lordship about it! Do you suppose we should ever have taken the trouble to get into your miserable cart, and be jolted and shaken over the stones, if we hadn't thought we were going to Summerley?"

Smith only laughed at this; so did his wife, so did four or five of Smith's children, who had now come to the gate, and appeared quite to relish Ernie's predicament. As to Ned, he stood with his hands in his pockets and his eyes fixed on the ground. He had not produced his handkerchief, having an instinctive feeling that its display would be useless here. But when his friend had finished he raised his head, and said "It's no use trying it on, Ernie; it won't do here. It's a bad job, but we must make the best of it. Let's start off home at once."

"It's all very fine for you, but how on earth am I to walk all that way. I can't, and it's no use attempting it. I tell you what it is, my good

man, if you don't drive us back as far at any rate as where you took us up, I'll go to his lordship, and tell him of your conduct. I'll find my way to the house, dark as it is, and you'll see what he'll say to you, making believe you're a respectable tradesman, and bringing people miles out of their way, on a dark rainy night like this."

"Oh come, I say, none of that. Just you go on, you two, and I'll do more for you than you deserve, and put you in the right road out." He took the two boys a little way down the path, then directed them what course to follow, and turned back to unharness his horse, and get his tea.

Ned and Ernie walked on ruefully enough. They kept to the broad path, as the gamekeeper had told them, which, after passing by some copses, brought them into a noble avenue of elm trees, where, after a while, the sight of Lord Sandown's house, now all lit up, burst upon them, though they were a considerable distance from it.

"Looks well from here, doesn't it?" said Ned.

"Ah, I suppose it's getting towards their dinner time," replied Ernie. "Don't it show the selfishness of human nature, Ned, and of the aristocracy in particular, that they should think

of sitting down, eating and drinking of the best, while we're out here, drenched and hungry. Ah! I wonder what they've got. What should you say, Ned?"

"Turtle soup, I've no doubt," replied Ned, "and twelfth-cake and macaroons instead of plain bread, to eat with it. Being Christmas-time, they'll have green peas and strawberries. Wouldn't care for them, you know, in midsummer, when every one can get them. Oh, I say, the rain's coming on faster than ever. My pockets are quite wet, and the crackers will all be spoiled."

By this time they had reached the bridge, which spanned a stream of some length, that ran through Milford Chase. They crossed over, and then attempted to follow the gamekeeper's directions, and proceed accordingly.

But the night was very dark, and the rain came on faster than ever, so it was no wonder that they lost their way, and that before long, Ernie found himself, instead of being on dry land, ankle deep in the stream. He called to Ned for assistance, which the other ran to give; but his own foot slipping, he fell over Ernie, and they both rolled into the water, and had as narrow an escape from drowning as ever

two boys had ; but, however, they both scrambled out at last, wet through from top to toe. Their caps would certainly have gone, but that, on starting, they had taken the precaution of securing them by their narrow elastic bands ; but they were not of much use, as the wet streamed from them over their faces, and inside their collars.

"This'll be the death of me, Ned," said Ernie, mournfully, "I don't blame you, though you've led me into it. I'm willing to believe you acted for the best, and it'll be a comfort to you, if you get over this night, that you'd my forgiveness. Oh, dear ! wherever are we getting now ?"

They found themselves knee deep in the skeletons of ferns and underwood. They were approaching a part of the park where the game was most plentiful. The rain now began to abate, and after a time the moon came out. Ned shook the moisture from his clothes, as if he had been a dog ; took off his cap, that the wet might drain on the ground ; brushed his hair from his eyes, and began to feel a shade less wretched. But they had quite lost sight of the house, and wandered about a considerable time, only getting more and more involved in the wildest recesses of the park. They were at length quite exhausted, and, wet as they were, felt obliged to sit down

and rest awhile. Presently they heard a faint murmur of men's voices, and a subdued stealthy trampling of feet. "Robbers!" gasped Ernie, clinging closely to Ned; "Murderers, perhaps! Oh, dear! we're done for now."

"Stuff!" said Ned, shaking him off; "gamekeepers, more likely. We'll get up and follow them, and see if they'll put us in the right road home."

They were neither of them right. The voices were not those either of murderers or gamekeepers, but of poachers. Bill Trot, the leader of the party, having received a large order from a London poulterer, and being a thorough man of business, was going round the preserves with a couple of his friends, in order to execute the commission. He had been busy the preceding night in the grounds of Lord Hyde, Lord Sandown's nearest neighbour; but was still in want of a couple of cock pheasants and a hare. He was anxious to forward the whole by the night train, having promised to do so, and he reckoned that, by beating that part of Lord Sandown's preserves which was the furthest from any of the lodges, at a time when, as he well knew, the gamekeepers would be enjoying their pipes and ale, either at home, or at the beer-shop,

he might very well succeed in doing so. "As to the little we want," he said to his companions, "it's soon knocked down. I've set a springe that ought to have a hare in, and if we do have to fire a gun, it's hard if we can't bolt with what we've nabbed before they've time to come up to us."

As they had expected, the hare was in the springe, and it was soon taken out, and knocked on the head; but the pheasants would require the gun. As the boys drew nearer, four or five fine birds arose, and were aimed at. Down two fell, one with great force, plump on Ernie's head, who, frightened not only by the blow from the bird, but by the sound of the gun, shrieked out—

"I'm killed!—oh, Ned, it's all over with me."

The poachers were panic stricken, and the man who had fired the gun, letting it fall in his fright, tore away as fast as his legs would carry him, and never stopped till he was safely at home by his cottage fire. The others paused a second, but hearing Ned's voice, which was gruff with the cold he had caught afresh, from the underwood, as he stooped down to see if his companion was really hurt, and not being able to perceive whether it was a man or a boy, took it for granted it was the

former, and imagining they had been accessories to the murder of a gamekeeper, threw away the hare, and took to flight also.

It was some time before Ernie could be brought to believe that he was neither killed nor wounded. He sat up, rubbed his legs, felt his arms, twisted himself about, passed his hand over his head and face, and then said, "I don't *feel* the ball, Ned, but I'm persuaded it went into me. It was the most curious feeling I ever knew. Like a thunderbolt right in my face. I fancy it's lodged in some fleshy part. I'll be examined if ever I live to get out of this place, for fear of its working its way inwards, and doing me serious mischief. Don't you think I'd better go to one of the London hospitals?"

"Let's go home first," said Ned, "and then talk about that. I dare say you'll be all right by the time we get there. Walking's the best thing for you, as the ball's as likely to work its way out as in, you know, with the exercise."

Ernie stood up, and supported himself on Ned's shoulder. "I feel a little stiff—perhaps it's in one of my legs. Hallo! what's this?"

He stooped down and picked up the pheasant, which the increasing light of the moon allowed him to see was a large and beautiful bird. "It's

a stunner ; isn't it, Ned ? This'll be worth taking home—if ever we get there."

They walked on a few paces, when Ned espied the gun, and seized it as his prize.

"Well, I say, this'll make up for our wetting, Ernie. It's a real one, and no mistake ! Won't I go at the sparrows when I get back home ! Get out of the way ; I want to try it now."

"Oh, don't, for mercy sake—do mind what you're about," screamed Ernie, who had a wholesome horror of fire-arms, "or it'll go off by itself." He ran on a few yards, to get further from the gun, when he stumbled on the hare.

"Just look here, Ned ! ain't we in luck, after all ? Won't this be prime if Chambers cooks it properly, with plenty of gravy and currant jelly. Suppose we have it jugged, and the pheasant roasted ? They'll be a dinner fit for a king."

"First rate," said Ned. "That precious game-keeper brought us here for something after all. I'll write and tell him so to-morrow, with my compliments. Now, let's get along with our booty, and see about finding our way home, or they'll think we're lost. We shall be all right now the moon's out. I've been in this part of the park last summer, and know something of it."

They walked on in a much more cheerful frame

of mind than they had done ten minutes before, speculating, as they went, upon the character and pursuits of the parties who had left the gun and game behind, and were getting in the right track at last, when they met with an unpleasant interruption.

Two of the gamekeepers had heard the report of the gun, and proceeding in the direction of the sound, encountered our boys, who were now walking manfully forward, the one bearing his gun, the other the hare and pheasant. "Cheeky enough about it," one whispered to the other—"only boys, too! Look at them."

"Ah, I've seen them before," cried the other, who was Mr. Smith himself. "Impudent young rascals! actually rode right into the park in the cart Burrows lent me to bring those things home I was telling you of. Cheeky, indeed! you'd have said so, if you'd heard how that one with the hare went on. Hallo, you sirs! just give up those things you're carrying, and come along with us."

"I've not the slightest objection to come along with you," said Ernie; "but as to giving up what I'm carrying, that's quite another matter. Finding's keeping all the world over! At any rate, in such a place as this; so just put us in the right road to go out, unless indeed you'll lend us a conveyance,

which would only be civil on your part, and what you ought to do, as I told you before."

"Oh, we'll put you in the right road—no fear of that," said Mr. Smith, with the utmost good humour. He had made up his mind that Ernie was no other than Charley Trot, the son and heir of the poacher of that name, and who was shrewdly suspected of lending a very helping hand in his father's business. Smith had never seen the youth, not having been long in his present situation, but he had heard him described as a lad of fifteen, who looked several years younger, was delicate looking, and for his station, rather gentlemanly in appearance, but who in reality was the most notorious young scamp in Milford, and as good a shot, so it was said, as his father.

Smith settled in his own mind that Ernie's cool, free and easy behaviour was only so much acting to throw him off his guard, and make him believe he really had a young gentleman to deal with, who had lost his way, and picked up the game; so he continued, "We'll give you a conveyance, too, and a night's lodging into the bargain. Anything to oblige such pretty-spoken, nice little dears, and I've no doubt my lord himself will come and see you when we get you to his house—he'll be so pleased to see you there."

"That's really very polite of him," answered Ernie, "but we've no time to spare, you see, even to pay his lordship a visit. I don't mind coming another day, if he'll send one of his carriages up for me. But now I should like to see the conveyance you were talking of, for it's getting late, and they'll be uneasy about us at home. Besides, I want my supper."

"I dare say you do," replied Mr. Smith, "but you must come to his lordship's first, and see what he thinks about sending you on. I expect he'll be so taken with your company, he won't part with you at all till the morning. There's a nice little room in the Chase, fitted up so prettily with locks and bars, that'll just suit you and your young friend. But come, young fellow," turning to Ned, "I'm afraid that gun's too heavy for you; just hand it over here if you please."

"Stand off," cried Ned, placing his back against a tree, as he had seen the robbers do at the theatre, "there's two words to that. I'll fire, if you don't mind."

The men were amused at the boy's pluck, and they were not aware that the gun was not loaded; neither was he. Smith hesitated a minute, then he said, "Well, if you two youngsters will come peaceably with us to the Chase, we'll let you carry

the things as far as there. Then, you know, you'll have to see what his lordship says to the matter."

"Well, I only hope it isn't much further," said Ernie, "for I'm dreadfully tired. Ned, I wouldn't mind trusting *you*, and these creatures are terribly heavy. Can't you just carry the hare?"

"No, thank you, this gun's no light weight. But if you want to dine off either of them tomorrow, don't let anyone else take them."

They walked on, each of the gamekeepers holding one by the arm, till they reached the Chase, which they entered by a side-door, and were conducted into the servants' hall, which at that time was unoccupied, except by some of the women servants, as the footmen were in attendance at the dinner-table, upon which they were just placing the dessert.

"We'd better let his lordship know at once who we've got," said Smith. "One of you girls, run and tell Mr. Simmons I want him if he'll please to step this way. Say it is a message of importance for him to take to his lordship."

The girl ran off in search of Mr. Simmons, who was his lordship's valet, and in his own estimation, and I believe in that of the household generally, a much greater man, and certainly a

much finer gentleman, than his master—and Smith addressed the boys—

“Now, I think you two have played at being young gentlefolks out on the lark long enough, so you’d better drop it now, and give up the gun, if you want his lordship to show any favour to you. It’s no use trying it on any longer, Charley Trot. I know you, so you may as well own to your right name at once.”

“Charley Trot! who on earth are you talking to?” said Ernie. “I’m Ernest Elton, Esquire. Where’s that carriage you promised to send me home in? If you’d any civility, you’d have asked me to dry my wet things by the fire while I’m waiting.”

“Oh, dear, he *is* wet,” cried a compassionate housemaid, and she made way for Ernie and his friend to the hearth, on which was a glorious fire, that quite cheered the wet and weary boys.

“Oh, my goodness! take care of that gun,” exclaimed another. “Mr. Smith, why don’t you take it from him.”

“Try it,” replied Mr. Smith, grimly. “We must get it away though, sooner or later, come what will. Now you —, what’s your name?”

“Edward Saville,” said Ned, sullenly, as he stood with his back to the fire, and the gun firmly

held in both hands, with one finger on the trigger. If it *had* been loaded, there might have been mischief done.

"Pretty name," whispered the compassionate housemaid to another, "fit for a novel, isn't it?"

"Novel, indeed!" said Mr. Smith, "I doubt whether it's his own. The other I'm convinced is Charley Trot; let him call himself what he pleases. However, one name'll do as well as another to be sent to prison by; that's one consolation."

"Prison," said Ned, ruefully, "why what harm have I done?"

"Only gone poaching in his lordship's preserves, and then refused to give up your gun when desired to do so; that's all. A nice little case it will be. Let's see what Mr. Simmons says to it."

Mr. Simmons now came in, and heard Smith's account of the whole affair, and Ernie and Ned were astonished to find what flagrant offences they had been guilty of. They had not had the slightest idea of the wickedness of their conduct till they heard Mr. Smith's version of it. Ned's courage began to falter, but he still kept firm hold of the gun, and Ernie was determined, let what would happen, he would still retain possession of the hare and pheasant.

Mr. Smith concluded with, "And now, Mr. Simmons, his lordship ought to know at once we've got these two nice little dears, as I don't know whether I'd better take them to the station-house, or have them locked up in the strong-room here. Will you just go and tell him the state of the case?"

"He's at dinner," said Mr. Simmons; "it won't do to disturb him now."

"You can go up quietly behind his chair, and whisper it to him. It's of consequence, you see. He'll be as pleased as Punch when he hears we've taken this young incorrigible. It'll be a better sauce to the meat than any the cook's sent up."

"Well, I'll venture it," replied Mr. Simmons, after a little consideration; "keep them here till I come back again."

The compassionate housemaid had had her warmest sympathies excited by the gamekeeper's story. She did admire daring, that she did! It was as good as any story she ever read. But she was afraid to show her sympathy too warmly unless supported by those who had more influence in the household than herself, so she ran off to the housekeeper's room, where she found that personage, and two or three ladies'-maids,

attendants of visitors staying at the Chase, indulging in gossip and tea at the same time.

"Oh, Mrs. Rickards, would you mind stepping into the servant's hall? There's two of the dearest little pets of poachers you ever set eyes on. Won't the other ladies come? Such interesting looking little things—one especially—got the sweetest blue eyes, and light curly hair, you ever saw. I'm sure he's a gentleman's son in disguise; had a hard stepmother, perhaps, that's driven him from his home, and made him take to this line of life. It's a picture to see them, pretty dears! One's got a gun, and holds it as brave as a guardsman; and the other, the nicest looking of the two, has a hare and a pheasant. And oh, Mrs. Rickards, as you're going, might I be so bold as to ask for a mug of tea for them? They're wet, poor dears! from head to foot, and that hard-hearted Smith does nothing but abuse and go on at them."

Mrs. Rickards consented to the tea, and Sophy quickly poured out two large mugs-full, cut some bread and butter, and took it to the boys.

They were very thankful for it, as they really stood in need of something; but not even to eat or drink would either part with his booty; so

Sophy served as a right hand to each, and waited on them most assiduously.

Mrs. Rickards was very favourably impressed with Ernie's appearance. Wet and dirty as he was, she fancied she saw the signs of a gentleman's son, while Ned, though he had not pulled out his handkerchief, as, while holding the gun with one hand, and carrying tea or bread and butter to his mouth with the other, he could not conveniently do so, put on an air of composed mournful penitence, which gave her a very favourable opinion of him.

"They're no common poachers, that's clear," she whispered to the lady's-maid who stood nearest. "There's not a doubt of it, they're gentlemen's sons, run away from school perhaps. Dear me, they *are* wet, poor things! I should think a little cherry brandy wouldn't do them any harm."

Ernie caught the words, and looked up. "I should really be thankful for some, ma'am, for I'm not very strong, and having had a great deal to tire me, and got wet too, I feel quite sinking; and if you had such a thing as a biscuit, or a slice of cake, to keep it from going to my head, I should be glad."

Mrs. Rickards gave her keys to Sophy, told

her what to do ; and that good-natured damsel presently returned with two brimming glasses of cherry brandy, and a plateful of rich pound cake.

Mr. Smith and his fellow-gamekeeper looked grimly on. Nobody offered cherry brandy to *them*. There seemed something profitable in poaching after all. Ernie finished his, and then emboldened, looked up to Mrs. Rickards, and said—

“ Can you tell me when his lordship will be able to see us, ma’am ? It’s most unpleasant to be kept waiting like this, for I really want to go home, and get my supper.”

Mrs. Rickards shook her head. “ I’m sure I can’t tell ; perhaps not till the morning. What shall you do with them, Mr. Smith, if he don’t ? ”

“ He’ll send down word about them,” answered Smith, gruffly. “ Lock ’em up in the strong-room, most likely.”

Here Sophy and the ladies’-maids uttered a cry of horror, and looked at Mr. Smith as if he were a monster. Ned having a hand to spare at last, pulled out his handkerchief, and applied it gently to his eyes, which, as Sophy afterwards declared, quite brought the tears in hers, and Ernie burst forth indignantly—

“ You’ll be had up for false imprisonment, if

you do, see if you ain't! Just as if we'd done anything to be punished for! I consider, Ned, his lordship ought to be very much obliged to us for driving the poachers out of his park, and so I mean to tell him, when I see him."

This view of the case reassured Master Ned; and just then Simmons came down, to say that his lordship and several of the ladies, hearing what desperate characters Mr. Smith had brought into the house, felt curious to see them, and dinner being now over, they were to go in with the dessert, adding, "I've represented to his lordship the shocking condition of the juvenile offenders, but it only served to make the ladies more anxious to see them, such is fem'nin cur'osity."

Mrs. Rickards looked at the boys' feet. "They'll ruin the carpets, Mr. Simmons, but I suppose neither his lordship nor the ladies thought of that—and wouldn't it be as well to give their faces a wipe?"

Sophy caught at the word, ran out, and quickly returned with a basin of warm water, a towel, a brush, and two clean linen collars of her own. She and the youngest of the ladies' maids set to work, and, in a second almost, greatly changed the appearance of the lads for the better. As they went

out of the hall, Sophy whispered to Ernie, "Never mind, dear—if you *are* sent to the strong-room, I'll see that you've as good a bed as any in the house, and I'll answer for it, Mrs. Rickards won't let you go without your supper."

They followed the valet, and, led by Mr. Smith, proceeded to the dining-room. Lord Sandown turned round, and regarded them attentively. He would not himself have had them brought there, but when he had laughingly acquainted his guests with what Mr. Simmons had communicated to him in the solemnest of whispers, the curiosity of the ladies was excited, and they declared that they really must see these two precocious little poachers. Ned's threatening to fire at the gamekeeper made them very interested about him, and they were rather surprised to see the two lads, who did not look nearly such desperate villains as they were represented.

The boys stood side by side, Ernie with his precious hare and pheasant, Ned with his gun, now more firmly clasped than ever.

"Which is Charlie Trot?" asked his lordship.

Smith pointed to Ernie. "Well, Trot, what have you got to say for yourself?" began the Earl. "This is a very serious matter; young as you are, you're quite old enough to know better."

"Did your lordship speak to me?" replied Ernie, "for my name isn't Trot; and I really do think if your lordship's disposed to find fault, you'd better do it with your man Smith, here, who's driven us out of our way, imposed a baker's cart upon us as his own, made us lose ourselves in the park, and then taken us up as poachers, and talks of locking us up. Isn't it all true, Ned?"

Ned murmured assent in a faint voice, and then observing the ladies for the first time—for the desert till now had engrossed all his attention—pulled out his little red handkerchief, which he had dried by the fire, and began making use of it in his usual manner, under distressing circumstances.

"Whatever's all this about the cart, and losing their way?" asked his lordship. Smith told this part of the story his own fashion, when my lord observed, "Well, I really consider, Trot, or whatever you choose to call yourself, you were much to blame for getting into the cart by stealth. How can anyone tell what your intentions were?"

"Our intentions," rejoined Ernie, "were only to have a ride up to Summerley Common, where we made sure the cart was going—then Smith turned us out, and we lost our way and got nearly drowned, at least, I did, and caught my death of cold into the bargain. I shan't easily get over

.

this night's work. Then we met the poachers, and frightened them away—didn't they run, Ned? and left this gun and the hare and bird behind them. Of course, we picked them up, and mean to take them home with us. Smith's been promising us some conveyance all the way he brought us here, and I do hope your lordship will make him keep his word, for we shall never be able to walk, especially with all these things to carry."

Ernie's address excited considerable amusement. If he *was* a poacher, he certainly was a very peculiar one; but Ernie himself was very much surprised at the laughter he caused, as he was never more earnest in his life. His lordship smiled, but he felt rather puzzled, and a little vexed about the matter, and began to think Mr. Smith had been somewhat officious. But the gamekeeper observed,

"He's the very artfullest young villin in the place, by all accounts, my lord. It's only his artfulness, trying to pass himself off as a gentleman's son. Ernest Elton, indeed!"

"Oh, is that what he calls himself," said one of the ladies, a bright, good-humoured girl of twenty; "rather a pretty name, much too nice for a poacher."

Smith shook his head. "*He's* no more Ernest Elton, my lady, than I am. Who's to prove it, I should like to know?"

Ernie looked up amazed. "Why, whoever can know my name better than I do myself?"

"Isn't there anyone in the place that knows Charley Trot?" his lordship asked impatiently.

Now the other gamekeeper had seen Charlie occasionally, but his intellects to-night were not quite so clear as might be wished, owing, perhaps, to a visit in the early part of the evening to the Sandown Arms. He had been content to leave the matter in the hands of his superior, satisfied himself that if Ernie wasn't young Trot, he was uncommonly like him, and, at any rate, had been behaving in a very Trot-like manner. By this time, as Smith knew, he was fast asleep by the fire in the servants' hall, and it was scarcely desirable to have him as a witness, either for or against Ernie's identity. However, Ned pretty well settled the point, by producing from his pocket the crackers, in a very wet and washed-out state, and the directions as to the number and quantity he was to buy, which Ethie had written out on the back of an envelope, addressed to her father, "Thomas Grey, Esq., Elm Tree House, Summerley Common."

He handed it to his lordship. "That's my uncle's name, Sir." Ned was not used to lords, so he forgot the title; "and here's the crackers we were to buy, and this is Ernie Elton, who's spending his Christmas holidays along with me there."

His lordship took the envelope; then observed, "I'm afraid, Smith, there's some mistake here. However, Master Ernie—if Ernie you are—has your schoolmaster taught you the Latin for 'hare?'"

"Oh, dear!" thought Ernie, "I never did see the use of Latin before. I'll make a guess and try." So he looked confident, and replied, "Lupus!"

"Eh, you goose," cried Ned, "it's spelt with an E."

"Spelt too well for a poacher, at any rate," said Lord Sandown; "but, however, even if you really are respectable boys, you must be aware that you should not have been roaming about in my park at this time of night."

"No, we certainly should not," replied Ernie. "That's the very thing I told Smith myself; but how were we to help it? What on earth did he mean by driving a baker's cart from Summerley down here? As I told him, having

brought us so much out of our way, the least he could do was to take us back again."

To Ernie's surprise, this view of the matter only made everyone laugh still more, and the pretty, bright-eyed girl, who had spoken before, observed, "And he really wouldn't do it, Ernie?—what a shame!"

"So it was," said Ned, gravely; and applying his handkerchief to one eye, while he fixed the other on the young lady, he continued, mournfully, "However are we to get home, Miss, now we've been brought so much out of our way, especially me, with this great gun to carry?"

"Gun!" exclaimed his lordship. "Why you don't expect to be allowed to take that away with you? What on earth will you do with it?"

"Pop at the sparrows," said Ned, with a nod of satisfaction. "There's lots in Finsbury Square, and they make capital puddings."

"Oh, of course he ought to have the gun," said the young lady who had spoken before; and the other ladies joined in, and represented the case to his lordship in so urgent a manner that he agreed that the boys should be allowed to depart with their booty, and gave orders that they should be safely driven home at once.

"This is better than old Whiteley's omnibus,"

observed Ernie, when they were comfortably installed inside the snug, luxurious brougham. "I think I've got you pretty well out of this scrape, Ned."

Their absence, however, for so long a period from Elm Tree House had created no little alarm. Tom did his best to reassure Mrs. Grey, by telling her Ernie was perfectly sure to turn up sooner or later, though possibly without a dry thread on him; but their triumphant entrance into the drawing-room was a thing even Tom was not prepared for. However, they were sent off at once—"to be made decent," as Chambers expressed it—and reappeared in time for supper, and Ernie narrated his exploits in so glowing a style that he and Ned were the heroes of the night.

The next day Mr. Elton and Mr. Saville came, each to fetch his son, when they received from Mrs. Grey an account of the manner in which Ernie and Ned had distinguished themselves during the holidays. She concluded by saying, she considered the boys were both being fast spoiled for want of the proper discipline of a boarding school, and warmly recommended the gentlemen to follow Mr. Brooke's example, who was about to send Tom away to an establishment

a few miles from Summerley that bore a very high character.

They both said they would consider the matter. They did consider it, and the end of their consideration was, that Tom found, when he made his *débüt* at school, that he was expected to take Ned and Ernie under his especial charge, and do his best to look after them in play hours.

How he succeeded, and what happened; what further disasters they fell into, or what other adventures they met with, I may, perhaps, tell you in the holidays, when Tom, Ned, and Ernie are home from school for theirs.

THE END.

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